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MADONNA MARY.

VOL. II.

MADONNA MARY.

BY

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"THE LIFE OF EDWARD IRVING,"

"AGNES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

THE announcement of Winnie's engagement made, as was to be looked for, a considerable commotion among all the people connected with her. The very next morning Sir Edward himself came down to the Cottage with a very serious face. He had been disposed to play with the budding affection and to take pleasure in the sight of the two young creatures as they drew towards each other; for Percival, though in love, was not without prudence (his friend thought), and Winnie, though very open to impressions, was capricious and fanciful, and not the kind of girl, Sir Edward imagined, to say Yes to the first man who asked her. Thus the only sensible adviser on the spot had wilfully blinded himself. It had not occurred to him that Winnie might think of Percival, not as the first man who had ever asked her, but as the

only man whom she loved; nor that Percival, though prudent enough, liked his own way, and was as liable to be carried away by passion as a better man. These reflections had not come into Sir Edward's head, and consequently he had rather encouraged the growing tenderness, which now all at once had turned into earnest, and had become a matter of responsibility and serious concern. Sir Edward came into Miss Seton's pretty drawing-room with care on his brow. The young people had gone out together to Kirtell-side to visit the spot of their momentous interview, and doubtless to go over it all again, as people do at that foolish moment, and only Aunt Agatha and Mrs. Ochterlony were at home. Sir Edward went in, and sat down between the two ladies, and offered his salutations with a pensive gravity which made Mary smile, but brought a cloud of disquietude over Aunt Agatha's gentle countenance. He sighed as he said it was a fine day. He even looked sympathetically at the roses, as if he knew of some evil that was about to befall them;—and his old neighbour knew his ways and knew that he meant something, and with natural consciousness divined at once what it was.

"You have heard what has happened," said Aunt Agatha, trembling a little, and laying

down her work. "It is so kind of you to come over at once; but I do hope that is not why you are looking so grave?"

"Am I looking grave?" said Sir Edward, clearing up in an elaborate way; "I did not mean it, I am sure. I suppose we ought to have seen it coming and been prepared; but these sort of things always take one by surprise. I did not think Winnie was the girl to—to make up her mind all at once, you know—the very first man that asked her. I suppose it was my mistake."

"If you think it was the very first that asked her!" cried Aunt Agatha, who felt this reproach go to her heart, "it *is* a mistake. She is only eighteen—a mere child—but I was saying to Mary only yesterday, that it was not for want of being admired——"

"Oh, yes," said Sir Edward, with a little wave of his hand, "we all know she has been admired. One's eyes alone would have proved that; and she deserves to be admired; and that is generally a girl's chief stronghold, in my opinion. She knows it, and learns her own value, and does not yield to the first fellow who has the boldness to say right out——"

"I assure you, Sir Edward," said Aunt Agatha, growing red and very erect in her chair,

and assuming a steadiness which was unfortunately quite contradicted by the passionate quiver of her lip, "that you do Winnie great injustice—so far as being the first goes——"

"What does it matter if he were the first or the fiftieth, if she likes him?" said Mary, who had begun by being much amused, but who had ended by being a little indignant; for she had herself married at eighteen and never had a lover but Hugh Ochterlony, and felt herself disapproved of along with her sister.

Upon which Sir Edward shook his head.

"Certainly, my dear Mary, if she likes him," said the Baronet; "but the discouraging thing is, that an inexperienced girl—a girl so very well brought up as Winnie has been—should allow herself, as I have said, to like the very first man who presents himself. One would have thought some sort of introduction was necessary before such a thought could have penetrated into her mind. After she had been obliged to receive it in that way—then, indeed ——But I am aware that there are people who have not my scruples," said Sir Edward, with a sigh; for he was, as all the neighbourhood was aware, a man of the most delicate mind.

"If you think my dear, pure-minded child is

not scrupulous, Sir Edward!" cried poor Aunt Agatha—but her emotion was so great that her voice failed her; and Mary, half amused and half angry, was the only champion left for Winnie's character, thus unexpectedly assailed.

"Poor child, I think she is getting very hard measure," said Mary. "I don't mean to blame you, but I think both of you encouraged her up to the last moment. You let them be always together, and smiled on them; and they are young, and what else could you expect? It is more delicate to love than to flirt," said Mrs. Ochterlony. She had not been nearly so well brought up as her sister, nor with such advanced views, and what she said brought a passing blush upon her matron cheek. Winnie could have discussed all about love without the shadow of a blush, but that was only the result of the chronological difference, and had nothing to do with purity of heart.

"If we have had undue confidence," said Sir Edward, with a sigh, "we will have to pay for it. Mary speaks—as I have heard many women speak—without making any consideration of the shock it must be to a delicate young girl; and I think, after the share which I may say I have myself had in Winnie's education, that

I might be permitted to express my surprise; and Percival ought to have shown a greater regard for the sacredness of hospitality. I cannot but say that I was very much vexed and surprised."

It may well be supposed that such an address, after poor Aunt Agatha's delight and exultation in her child's joy, and her willingness to see with Winnie's eyes and accept Winnie's lover on his own authority, was a most confounding utterance. She sat silent, poor lady, with her lips apart and her eyes wide open, and a kind of feeling that it was all over with Winnie in her heart. Aunt Agatha was ready to fight her darling's battles to her last gasp, but she was not prepared to be put down and made an end of in this summary way. She had all sorts of pretty lady-like deprecations about their youth and Winnie's inexperience ready in her mind, and had rather hoped to be assured that to have her favourite thus early settled in life was the very best that anybody would desire for her. Miss Seton had been so glad to think in former days that Sir Edward always understood her, and she had thought Winnie's interests were as dear to him as if she had been a child of his own; and now to think that Sir Edward regarded an event so important for Winnie as an evidence

of indelicacy on her part, and of a kind of treachery on her lover's! All that Aunt Agatha could do was to throw an appealing look at Mary, who had hitherto been the only one dissatisfied or disapproving. She knew more about Captain Percival than any one. Would not she say a word for them now?

"He must have thought that was what you meant when you let them be so much together," said Mary. "I think, if you will forgive me, Sir Edward, that it is not *their* fault."

Sir Edward answered this reproach only by a sigh. He was in a despondent rather than a combative state of mind. "And you see I do not know so much as I should like to know about him," he said, evading the personal question. "He is a very nice fellow; but I told you the other day I did not consider him a paladin; and whether he has enough to live upon, or anything to settle on her——My dear Mary, at least you will agree with me, that considering how short a time they have known each other, things have gone a great deal too far."

"I do not know how long they have known each other," said Mary, who now felt herself called upon absolutely to take Aunt Agatha's part.

"Ah, *I* know," said Sir Edward, "and so does your aunt; and things did not go at railroad speed like this in *our* days. It is only about six weeks, and they are engaged to be married! I suppose you know as much about him as anybody—or so he gave me to understand at least; and do *you* think him a good match for your young sister?" added Sir Edward, with a tone of superior virtue which went to Mary's heart.

Mary was too true a woman not to be a partisan, and had the feminine gift of putting her own private sentiments out of the question in comparison with the cause which she had to advocate; but still it was an embarrassing question, especially as Aunt Agatha was looking at her with the most pathetic appeal in her eyes.

"I know very little of Captain Percival," she said; "I saw him once only in India, and it was at a moment very painful to me. But Winnie likes him—and you must have approved of him, Sir Edward, or you would not have brought him here."

Upon which Aunt Agatha rose and kissed Mary, recognising perfectly that she did not commit herself on the merits of the case, but at the same time sustained it by her support. Sir

Edward, for his part, turned a deaf ear to the implied reproach, but still kept up his melancholy view of the matter, and shook his head.

"He has good connexions," he said; "his mother was a great friend of mine. In other circumstances, and could we have made up our minds to it at the proper moment, she might have been Lady ——. But it is vain to talk of that. I think we might push him a little if he would devote himself steadily to his profession; but what can be expected from a man who wants to marry at five-and-twenty? I myself," said Sir Edward, with dignity, "though the eldest son——"

"Yes," said Aunt Agatha, unable to restrain herself longer, "and see what has come of it. You are all by yourself at the Hall, and not a soul belonging to you; and to see Francis Ochterlony with his statues and nonsense!—Oh, Sir Edward! when you might have had a dozen lovely children growing up round you——"

"Heaven forbid!" said Sir Edward, piously; and then he sighed—perhaps only from the mild melancholy which possessed him at the moment, and was occasioned by Winnie's indelicate haste to fall in love; perhaps, also,

from some touch of personal feeling. A dozen lovely children might be rather too heavy an amount of happiness, while yet a modified bliss would have been sweet. He sighed and leant his head upon his hand, and withdrew into himself for the moment in that interesting way which was habitual to him, and had gained him the title of "poor Sir Edward." It might be very foolish for a man (who had his own way to make in the world) to marry at five-and-twenty; but still, perhaps it was rather more foolish when a man did not marry at all, and was left in his old age all alone in a great vacant house. But naturally, it was not this view of the matter which he displayed to his feminine companions, who were both women enough to have triumphed a little over such a confession of failure. He had a fine head, though he was old, and his hand was as delicate and almost as pale as ivory, and he could not but know that he looked interesting in that particular attitude, though, no doubt, it was his solicitude for these two indiscreet young people which chiefly moved him. "I am quite at a loss what to do," he said. "Mrs. Percival is a very fond mother, and she will naturally look to me for an account of all this; and there is your Uncle Penrose, Mary—a man I could never bear, as you all know—he

will come in all haste, of course, and insist upon settlements and so forth; and why all this responsibility should come on me, who have no desire in this world but for tranquillity and peace——"

"It need not come on you," said Mrs. Ochterlony; "we are not very great business people but still, with Aunt Agatha and myself——"

Sir Edward smiled. The idea diverted him so much that he raised his head from his hand. "My dear Mary," he said, "I have the very highest opinion of your capacity; but in a matter of this kind, for instance——And I am not so utterly selfish as to forsake my old neighbour in distress."

Here Aunt Agatha took up her own defence. "I don't consider that I am in distress," she said. "I must say, I did not expect anything like this, Sir Edward, from you. If it had been Mr. Penrose, with his mercenary ideas——I was very fond of Mary's poor dear mamma, and I don't mean any reflection on her, poor darling—but I suppose that is how it always happens with people in trade. Mr. Penrose is always a trial, and Mary knows that; but I hope I am able to bear something for my dear child's sake," Aunt Agatha continued, growing a little excited; "though I never thought that I should have to

bear——" and then the poor lady gave a stifled sob, and added in the midst of it, "this from you!"

This was a kind of climax which had arrived before in the familiar friendship so long existing between the Hall and the Cottage. The two principals knew how to make it up better than the spectator did who was looking on with a little alarm and a little amusement. Perhaps it was as well that Mary was called away to her own individual concerns, and had to leave Aunt Agatha and Sir Edward in the height of their misunderstanding. Mary went away to her children, and perhaps it was only in the ordinary course of human nature that when she went into the nursery among those three little human creatures, who were so entirely dependent upon herself, there should be a smile upon her face as she thought of the two old people she had left. It seemed to her, as perhaps it seems to most women in the presence of their own children, at sight of those three boys—who were "mere babies" to Aunt Agatha, but to Mary the most important existences in the world—as if this serio-comic dispute about Winnie's love affairs was the most quaintly-ridiculous exhibition. When she was conscious of this thought in her own mind, she rebuked it, of course; but at

the first glance it seemed as if Winnie's falling in love was so trivial a matter—so little to be put in comparison with the grave cares of life. There are moments when the elder women, who have long passed through all that, and have entered upon another stage of existence, cannot but smile at the love-matters, without considering that life itself is often decided by the complexion of the early romance, which seems to belong only to its lighter and less serious side. Sir Edward and Aunt Agatha for their part had never, old as they both were, got beyond the first stage—and it was natural it should bulk larger in their eyes. And this time it was they who were right, and not Mary, whose children were but children, and in no danger of any harm. Whereas, poor Winnie, at the top of happiness—gay, reckless, daring, and assured of her own future felicity—was in reality a creature in deadly peril and wavering on the verge of her fate.

But when the day had come to an end, and Captain Percival had at last retired, and Winnie, a little languid after her lover's departure, sat by the open window watching, no longer with despite or displeasure, the star of light which shone over the tree-tops from the Hall, there occurred a scene of a different description. But for the entire change in Winnie's looks and manner, the

absence of the embroidery frame at which she had worked so violently, and the languid softened grace with which she had thrown herself down upon a low chair, too happy and content to feel called upon to do anything, the three ladies were just as they had been a few evenings before; that is to say, that Aunt Agatha and Mary, to neither of whom any change was possible, were just as they had been before, while to the girl at the window, everything in heaven and earth had changed. The two others had had their day and were done with it. Though Miss Seton was still scarcely an old woman, and Mary was in the full vigour and beauty of life, they were both ashore high up upon the beach, beyond the range of the highest tide; while the other, in her boat of hope, was playing with the rippling incoming waters, and preparing to put to sea. It was not in nature that the two who had been at sea, and knew all the storms and dangers, should not look at her wistfully in her happy ignorance; perhaps even they looked at her with a certain envy too. But Aunt Agatha was not a woman who could let either well or ill alone—and it was she who disturbed the household calm which might have been profound that night, so far as Winnie was concerned.

"My dear love," said Aunt Agatha, with a

timidity which implied something to tell, "Sir Edward has been here. Captain Percival had told him, you know——"

"Yes," said Winnie, carelessly, "I know."

"And, my darling," said Miss Seton, "I am sure it is what I never could have expected from him, who was always such a friend; but I sometimes think he gets a little strange—as he gets old, you know——"

This was what the unprincipled woman said, not caring in the least how much she slandered Sir Edward, or anybody else in the world, so long as she gave a little comfort to the child of her heart. And as for Winnie, though she had been brought up at his feet, as it were, and was supposed by himself and others to love him like a child of his own, she took no notice of this unfounded accusation. She was thinking of quite a different person, just as Aunt Agatha was thinking of her, and Mary of her boys. They were women, each preoccupied and absorbed in somebody else, and they did not care about justice. And thus Sir Edward for the moment fared badly among them, though, if any outside assailant had attacked him, they would all have fought for him to the death.

"Well!" said Winnie, still very carelessly, as Miss Seton came to a sudden stop.

"My dear love!" said Aunt Agatha, "he has not a word to say against Captain Percival, that I can see——"

"Against Edward?" cried Winnie, raising herself up. "Good gracious, Aunt Agatha, what are you thinking of? Against Edward! I should like to know what he could say. His own godfather—and his mother was once engaged to him—and he is as good as a relation, and the nearest friend he has. What could he possibly have to say? And besides, it was he who brought him here; and we think he will leave us the most of his money," Winnie said, hastily—and then was very sorry for what she had said, and blushed scarlet and bit her lips, but it was too late to draw back.

"Winnie," said Miss Seton, solemnly. "If he has been calculating upon what people will leave to him when they die, I will think it is all true that Sir Edward said."

"You said Sir Edward did not say anything," cried Winnie. "What is it you have heard? It is of no use trying to deceive me. If there has been anything said against him, it is Mary who has said it. I can see by her face it is Mary. And if she is to be heard against *him*," cried Winnie, rising up in a blaze of wrath and indignation, "it is only just that he should be

heard on the other side. He is too good and too kind to say things about my sister to me; but Mary is only a woman, and of course she does not mind what she says. She can blacken a man behind his back, though he is far too honourable and too—too delicate to say what he knows of *her!*"

This unlooked for assault took Mary so entirely by surprise, that she looked up with a certain bewilderment, and could not find a word to say. As for Aunt Agatha, she too rose and took Winnie's hands, and put her arms round her as much as the angry girl would permit.

"It was not Mary," she said. "Oh, Winnie, my darling, if it was for your good, and an ease to my mind, and better for you in life—if it was for your good, my dear love—that is what we are all thinking of—could not you give him up?"

It was, perhaps, the boldest thing Aunt Agatha had ever done in all her gentle life—and even Winnie could not but be influenced by such unusual resolution. She made a wild effort to escape for the first moment, and stood with her hands held fast in Aunt Agatha's hands, averting her angry face, and refusing to answer. But when she felt herself still held fast, and that her fond guardian had the courage to hold to her question, Winnie's anger turned into another

kind of passion. The tears came pouring to her eyes in a sudden violent flood, which she neither tried to stop nor to hide. "No!" cried Winnie, with the big thunder-drops falling hot and heavy. "What is *my* good without him? If it was for my harm I shouldn't care. Don't hold me, don't look at me, Aunt Agatha! I don't care for anything in the world but Edward. I would not give him up—no, not if it was to break everybody's heart. What is it all to me without Edward?" cried the passionate girl. And when Miss Seton let her go, she threw herself on her chair again, with the tears coming in floods, but still facing them both through this storm-shower with crimson cheeks and shining eyes. As for poor Aunt Agatha, she too tottered back to her chair, frightened and abashed, as well as in distress; for young ladies had not been in the habit of talking so freely in her days.

"Oh, Winnie—and we have loved you all your life; and you have only known him a few weeks," she said, faltering, and with a natural groan.

"I cannot help it," said Winnie; "you may think me a wretch, but I like him best. Isn't it natural I should like him best? Mary did, and ran away, and nobody was shocked at her; and even you yourself——"

"I never, never, could have said such a thing all my life!" cried Aunt Agatha, with a maiden blush upon her sweet old cheeks.

"If you had, you would not have been a—— as you are now," said the dauntless Winnie; and she recovered in the twinkling of an eye, and wiped away her tears, and was herself again. Possibly what she had said was true and natural, as she asserted; but it is an unquestionable fact, that neither her aunt nor her sister could have said it for their lives. She was a young lady of the nineteenth century, and she acted accordingly; but it is a certain fact, as Aunt Agatha justly observed, whatever people may think now, that girls did not speak like that in *our* day.

CHAPTER II.

THE few weeks which ensued were the most stormy and troublous period of all Miss Seton's life; and through her there was naturally a considerable disturbance of the peace of the Cottage. Though she lived so quietly, she had what is called in the country "a large circle," and had dwelt among her own people all her life, and was known to everybody about. It was a quiet neighbourhood, but yet there never was a neighbourhood so quiet as not to have correspondents and relations living out in the world, to whom all news went, and from whom all news came. And there were a number of "families" about Kirtell, not great people certainly, but very respectable people, gentry, and well-connected persons, hanging on by various links to the great world. In this way Winnie's engagement, which nobody wanted to

conceal, came to be known far and wide, as such facts are so apt to get known. And a great many people out in the world, who had once known Miss Seton, wrote letters to her, in which they suggested that perhaps she had forgotten them, but hoped that she would excuse them, and attribute it to the regard which they had never ceased to feel for her, if they asked, Did she know Captain Percival very well, who was said to be engaged to her pretty niece? Had she heard what happened in the Isle of Man when his regiment was stationed there? and why it was that he did not go out to Gibraltar after he had got *that* appointment? Other people, who did not know Aunt Agatha, took what was after all the more disagreeable step of writing to their friends in the parish about the young man, whose career had certainly left traces, as it appeared, upon the memory of his generation. To rise every morning with a sense that such an epistle might be awaiting her on the breakfast-table—or to receive a visitor with the horrible conviction that she had come to look into her face, and hold her hand, and be confidential and sympathetic, and deliver a solemn warning—was an ordeal which Aunt Agatha found it hard to bear. She was a woman who never forgot her character as a

maiden lady, and liked to be justified by precedents and to be approved of by all the world. And these repeated remonstrances had no doubt a great effect upon her mind. They filled her with terrible misgivings and embittered her life, and drove her now and then into so great a panic that she felt disposed to thrust Captain Percival out of the house and forbid his reappearance there. But then, Winnie. Winnie was not the girl to submit to any such violent remedies. If she could not see her lover there, she would find means to see him somewhere else. If she could not be married to him with stately propriety in her parish church, she would manage to marry him somehow in any irregular way, and she would by no means hesitate to say so or shrink from the responsibility. And if it must be done, would it not be better that it should be done correctly than incorrectly, and with all things decent and in order? Thus poor Aunt Agatha would muse as she gathered up her bundle of letters. It might have been all very well for parents to exercise their authority in the days when their children obeyed them; but what was the use of issuing commands to which nobody would pay any attention? Winnie had very plainly expressed her preference for her

own happiness rather than her aunt's peace of mind; and though Miss Seton would never have consented to admit that Winnie was anything less than the most beautiful character, still she was aware that unreasoning obedience was not her faculty. Besides, another sentiment began to mingle with this prudential consideration. Everybody was against the poor young man. The first letters she received about him made her miserable; but after that there was no doubt a revulsion. Everybody was against him, poor fellow!—and he was so young, and could not, after all, have done so much harm in the world. "He has not had the time, Mary," she said, with an appeal to Mrs. Ochterlony for support. "If he had been doing wrong from his very cradle, he could not have had the time." She could not refuse to believe what was told her, and yet notwithstanding her belief she clung to the culprit. If he had found any other advocate it might have been different; but nobody took the other side of the question: nobody wrote a pretty letter to say what a dear fellow he was, and how glad his friends were to think he had found some one worthy of him—not even his mother; and Aunt Agatha's heart accordingly became the *avvocato del diavolo*. Fair play

was due even to Captain Percival. It was impossible to leave him assailed as he was by so many without one friend.

It was a curious sight to see how she at once received and ignored all the information thus conveyed to her. A woman of a harder type would probably, as women do, have imputed motives, and settled the matter with the general conclusion that "an enemy hath done this;" but Aunt Agatha could not help, for the moment at least, believing in everybody. She could not say right out, "It is not true," even to the veriest impostor who deceived and got money from her, and their name was legion. In her own innocent soul she had no belief in lies, and could not understand them; and it was easier for her to give credence to the wildest marvel than to believe that anybody could tell her a deliberate falsehood. She would have kissed the ladies who wrote to her of those stories about Captain Percival, and cried and wrung her hands, and asked, What could she do?—and yet her heart was by no means turned against him, notwithstanding her belief in what everybody said; which is a strange and novel instance, well enough known to social philosophers, but seldom remarked upon, of the small practical influence of belief upon life.

"How can it be a lie, my dear child? what motive could they all have to tell lies?" she would say to Winnie, mournfully; and yet ten minutes after, when it was Mrs. Ochterlony she was speaking to, she would make her piteous appeal for him, poor fellow!—"Everybody is against him; and he is so young still; and oh, Mary, how much he must need looking after," Aunt Agatha would say, "if it is all true!"

Perhaps it was stranger still that Mary, who did not like Captain Percival, and was convinced of the truth of all the stories told of him, and knew in her heart that he was her enemy and would not scruple to do her harm if the chance should come in his way—was also a little moved by the same argument. Everybody was against him. It was the Cottage against the world, so far as he was concerned; and even Mrs. Ochterlony, though she ought to have known better, could not help feeling herself one of a "side," and to a certain extent felt her honour pledged to the defence of her sister's lover. Had she, in the very heart of this stronghold which was standing out for him so stoutly, lifted up a testimony against him, she would have felt herself in some respects a domestic traitor. She might be silent on the subject, and avoid all comment, but she could not utter an adverse

opinion, or join in with the general voice against which Aunt Agatha and Winnie stood forth so steadfastly. As for Winnie, every word that was said to his detriment made her more determined to adhere to him. What did it matter whether he was good or bad, so long as it was indisputably *he?* There was but one Edward Percival in the world, and he would still be Edward Percival if he had committed a dozen murders, or gambled twenty fortunes away. Such was Winnie's defiant way of treating the matter which concerned her more closely than anybody else. She carried things with a high hand in those days. All the world was against her, and she scorned the world. She attributed motives, though Aunt Agatha did not. She said it was envy and jealousy and all the evil passions. She made wild counter-accusations, in the style of that literature which sets forth the skeleton in every man's closet. Who could tell what little incidents could be found out in the private history of the ladies who had so much to say about Captain Percival? This is so ordinary a mode of defence, that no doubt it is natural, and Winnie went into it with good will. Thus his standard was planted upon the Cottage, and however unkindly people might think of him outside, shelter and support were

always to be found within. Even Peggy, though she did not always agree with her mistress, felt, as Mrs. Ochterlony did, that she was one of a side, and became a partisan with an earnestness that was impossible to Mary. Sir Edward shook his head still, but he was disarmed by the close phalanx and the determined aspect of Percival's defenders. "It is true love," he said in his sentimental way; "and love can work miracles when everything else has failed. It may be his salvation." This was what he wrote to Percival's mother, who, up to this moment, had been but doubtful in her approbation, and very anxious, and uncertain, as she said, whether she ought not to tell Miss Seton that Edward had been "foolish." He had been "foolish," even in his mother's opinion; and his other critics were, some of them, so tolerant as to say "gay," and some "wild," while a few used a more solemn style of diction;—but everybody was against him, whatever terms they might employ; everybody except the ladies at the Cottage, who set up his standard, and accepted him with all his iniquities upon his head.

It may be worth while at this point, before Mr. Penrose arrives, who played so important a part in the business, to say a word about the poor young man who was thus universally

assailed. He was five-and-twenty, and a young man of expectations. Though he had spent every farthing which came to himself at his majority, and a good deal more than that, still his mother had a nice estate, and Sir Edward was his godfather, and the world was full of obliging tradespeople and other amiable persons. He was a handsome fellow, nearly six feet high, with plenty of hair, and a moustache of the most charming growth. The hair was of dull brown, which was rather a disadvantage to him, but then it went perfectly well with his pale complexion, and suited the cloudy look over the eyes, which was the most characteristic point in his face. The eyes themselves were good, and had, when they chose, a sufficiently frank expression, but there lay about the eyebrows a number of lurking hidden lines which looked like mischief—lines which could be brought into action at any moment, and could scowl, or lower, or brood, according to the fancy of their owner. Some people thought this uncertainty in his face was its greatest charm; you could never tell what a moment might bring forth from that moveable and changing forehead. It was suggestive, as a great many persons thought—suggestive of storm and thunder, and sudden disturbance, or even in some eyes of cruelty and

gloom—though he was a fine young man, and gay and fond of his pleasure. Winnie, as may be supposed, was not of this latter opinion. She even loved to bring out those hidden lines, and call the shadows over his face, for the pleasure of seeing how they melted away again, according to the use and wont of young ladies. It was a sort of uncertainty that was permissible to him, who had been a spoiled child, and whom everybody, at the beginning of his career, had petted and taken notice of; but possibly it was a quality which would not have called forth much admiration from a wife.

And with Winnie standing by him as she did —clinging to him closer at every new accusation, and proclaiming, without faltering, her indifference to anything that could be said, and her conviction that the worse he was the more need he had of her—Captain Percival, too, took matters very lightly. The two foolish young creatures even came to laugh, and make fun of it in their way. "Here is Aunt Agatha coming with another letter; I wonder if it is to say that I poisoned my grandmother, this time?" cried the young man; and they both laughed as if it was the best joke in the world. If ever there was a moment in which, when they were alone, Winnie did take a momentary thought

of the seriousness of the position, her gravity soon dissipated itself. "I know you have been very naughty," she would say, clasping her pretty hands upon his arm; "but you will never, never do it again," and the lover, thus appealed to, would make the tenderest and most eager assurances. What temptation could he ever have to be "naughty" with such an angel by his side? And Winnie was pleased enough to play the part of the angel—though that was not, perhaps, her most characteristic development—and went home full of happiness and security; despising the world which never had understood Edward, and thinking with triumph of the disappointed women less happy than herself, who, out of revenge, had no doubt got up this outcry against him. "For I don't mean to defend him out and out," she said, her eyes sparkling with malice and exultation; "I don't mean to say that he has not behaved very badly to a great many people:" and there was a certain sweet self-glorification in the thought which intoxicated Winnie. It was wicked, but somehow she liked him better for having behaved badly to a great many people; and naturally any kind of reasoning was entirely ineffectual with a foolish girl who had taken such an idea into her mind.

Thus things went on; and Percival went away and returned again, and paid many flying visits, and, present and absent, absorbed all Winnie's thoughts. It was not only a first love, but it was a first occupation to the young woman, who had never felt, up to this time, that she had a sufficient sphere for her energies. Now she could look forward to being married, to receiving all the presents, and being busy about all the business of that important moment; and beyond lay life—life without any one to restrain her, without even the bondage of habit, and the necessity of taking into consideration what people would think. Winnie said frankly that she would go with him anywhere, that she did not mind if it was India, or even the Cape of Good Hope; and her eyes sparkled to think of the everything new which would replace to her all the old bonds and limits: though, in one point of view, this was a cruel satisfaction, and very wounding and injurious to some of the other people concerned.

"Oh, Winnie, my darling! and what am I to do without you?" Aunt Agatha would cry; and the girl would kiss her in her laughing way. "It must have come, sooner or later," she said; "you always said so yourself. I don't see why you should not get married too, Aunt Agatha;

you are perfectly beautiful sometimes, and a great deal younger than—many people; or, at least, you will have Mary to be your husband," Winnie would add, with a laugh, and a touch of affectionate spite: for the two sisters, it must be allowed, were not to say fond of each other. Mary had been brought up differently, and was often annoyed, and sometimes shocked, by Winnie's ways: and Winnie—though at times she seemed disposed to make friends with her sister—could not help thinking of Mary as somehow at the bottom of all that had been said about Edward. This, indeed, was an idea which her lover and she shared: and Mary's life was not made pleasanter to her by the constant implication that he, too, could tell something about her—which she despised too much to take any notice of, but which yet was an offence and an insult. So that on the whole—even before the arrival of Mr. Penrose—the Cottage on Kirtellside, though as bowery and fair as ever, was, in reality, an agitated and even an uncomfortable home.

CHAPTER III.

MR. PENROSE was the uncle of Mary and Winnie, their mother's only brother. Mrs. Seton had come from Liverpool originally, and though herself very "nice," had not been, according to Aunt Agatha's opinion, "of a nice class." And her brother shared the evil conditions, without sharing the good. He was of his class, soul and body, and it was not a nice class —and, to tell the truth, his nieces had been brought up to ignore rather than to take any pleasure in him. He was not a man out of whom, under the best circumstances, much satisfaction could be got. He was one of the men who always turn up when something about money is going on in a house. He had had to do with all the wills and settlements in the family, though they were of a very limited description; but Mr. Penrose did not despise small things,

and was of opinion, that even if you had only a hundred pounds, you ought to know all about it, and how to take care of it. And he had once been very kind to Aunt Agatha, who was always defective in her arithmetic, and who, in earlier days, while she still thought of a possible change in her condition, had gone beyond the just limit of her income, and got into difficulties. Mr. Penrose had interfered at that period, and had been very kind, and set her straight, and had given her a very telling address upon the value of money: and though Miss Seton was not one of the people who take a favour as an injury, still she could have forgiven him a great many ill turns sooner than that good one. He had been very kind to her, and had ruffled all her soft plumes, and rushed up against her at all her tender points; and the very sound of his name was a lively irritant to Aunt Agatha. But he had to be acquainted with Winnie's engagement, and when he received the information, he lost no time in coming to see about it. He was a large, portly, well-to-do man, with one of his hands always in his pocket, and seemed somehow to breathe money, and to have no ideas which did not centre in it; and yet he had a good many ideas, and was a clever man in his way. With him, as with many people in the

world, there was one thing needful, and that one thing was money. He thought it was a duty to possess something—a duty which a man owed absolutely to himself, and to all who belonged to him—and if he did not acquit himself well on this point, he was, in Mr. Penrose's opinion, a very indifferent sort of person. There is something immoral to most people in the fact of being poor, but to Mr. Penrose it was a crime. He was very well off himself, but he was not a man to communicate of his goods as he did of his advice; and then he had himself a family, and could not be expected to give anything except advice to his nieces—and as for that one good thing, it was at their command in the most liberal way. He came to the Cottage, which was so especially a lady's house, and pervaded the whole place with his large male person, diffusing through it that moral fragrance which still betrays the Englishman, the man of business, the Liverpool man, wherever he may happen to bless the earth. Perhaps in that sweet-smelling dainty place, the perfume which breathed from Mr. Penrose told more decidedly than in the common air. As soon as you went in at the garden-gate you became sensible that the atmosphere was changed, and that a Man was there. Perhaps it may be thought that the presence of a

man in Aunt Agatha's maiden bower was not what might be called strictly proper, and Miss Seton herself had doubts on the subject; but then, Mr. Penrose never asked for any invitation, and it would have been very difficult to turn him out; and Mary was there, who at least was a married lady. He came without any invitation, and asked which was his room as if it had been his own house—and he complained of what he called "the smell" of the roses, and declared he would tear down all the sickly jasmine from the side of the house if it belonged to him. All this Miss Seton endured silently, feeling it her duty, for Winnie's sake, to keep all her connexions in good humour; but the poor lady suffered terribly under the process, as everybody could see.

"I hope it is only a conditional sort of engagement," Mr. Penrose said, after he had made himself comfortable, and had had a good dinner, and came into the drawing-room the first evening. The lovers had seized the opportunity to escape to Kirtell-side, and Mary was with her boys in the garden, and poor Aunt Agatha, a martyr of civility, was seated alone, awaiting the reappearance of her guest, and smiling upon him with anxious politeness. He threw himself into the largest and most solid chair he could find,

and spread himself, as it seemed, all over the room—a Man, coarse and undisguised, in that soft feminine paradise. Poor Sir Edward's graceful presence, and the elegant figure of Captain Percival, made no such impression. "I hope you have not settled it all without consulting anybody. To be sure, that don't matter very much; but I know you ladies have a summary way of settling such affairs."

"Indeed, I—I am afraid—I—I hope—it is all settled," said Aunt Agatha, with tremulous dignity. "It is not as if there was a great deal of money to settle. They are not—not rich, you know," she added, nervously. This was the chief thing to tell, and she was anxious to get it over at once.

"Not rich?" said Mr. Penrose. "No, I suppose not. A rich fellow would not have been such a fool as to entangle himself with Winnie, who has only her pretty face; but he has something, of course. The first thing to ascertain is, what they will have to live on, and what he can settle upon her. I suppose you have not let it go so far without having a kind of idea on these points?"

"Oh, yes," said Aunt Agatha, with a very poor pretence at composure; "oh, yes, Mr. Penrose, that is all quite right. He has very

nice expectations. I have always heard that Mrs. Percival had a charming little property; and Sir Edward is his godfather, and very fond of him. You will see it will come all right about that."

"Yes," said Mr. Penrose, who was nursing one of his legs—a colossal member, nearly as big as his hostess—in a meditative way, "I hope it will when *I* come to look into it. But we must have something more than expectations. What has he of his own?—and what do his mother and Sir Edward mean to do for him? We must have it in pounds, shillings, and pence, or he shan't have Winnie. It is best that he should make up his mind about that."

Aunt Agatha drew a frightened, panting breath; but she did not say anything. She had known what she would have to brave, and she was aware that Winnie would not brave it, and that to prevent a breach with her darling's only rich relation, it was necessary and expedient as long as she was alone to have it all out.

"Let me see," said Mr. Penrose, "you told me what he was in your letter—Captain, ain't he? As for his pay, that don't count. Let us go systematically to work if we are to do any good. I know ladies are very vague about busi-

ness matters, but still you must know something. What sort of a fellow is he, and what has he got of his own?"

"Oh, he is very nice," cried Aunt Agatha, consoled to find a question she could answer; "very, very nice. I do think you will like him very much; such a fine young fellow, and with what you gentlemen call no nonsense about him," said the anxious woman; "and with *excellent* connexions," she added, faltering again, for her enthusiasm awoke no answer in Mr. Penrose's face.

"My dear Miss Agatha," he said in his offensive way—and he always called her Miss Agatha, which was very trying to her feelings—"you need not take the trouble to assure me that a handsome young fellow who pays her a little attention, is always very nice to a lady. I was not asking whether he was nice; I was asking what were his means—which is a very much more important part of the subject, though you may not think so," Mr. Penrose added. "A charming little house like this, for instance, where you can have everything within yourself, and can live on honey and dew I suppose, may be kept on nothing—though you and I, to be sure, know a little different——"

"Mr. Penrose," said Aunt Agatha, trembling with indignation, "if you mean that the dinner was not particular enough——"

"It was a charming little dinner," said Mr. Penrose, "just what it ought to have been. Nothing could have been nicer than that white soup; and I think I am a judge. I was speaking of something to live on; a pretty house like this, I was saying, is not an analogous case. You have everything within yourself—eggs, and vegetables, and fruit, and your butter and milk so cheap. I wish we could get it like that in Liverpool; and —pardon me—no increase of family likely, you know."

"My niece Mary and her three children have come to the Cottage since you were last here, Mr. Penrose," said Aunt Agatha, with a blush of shame and displeasure. "It was the only house of all her relations that she could come to with any comfort, poor dear—perhaps you don't call that an increase of family; and as for the milk and butter——"

"She must pay you board," said Mr. Penrose, decisively; "there can be no question about that; your little money has not always been enough for yourself, as we both know. But all this is merely an illustration I was giving. It has nothing to do with the main subject. If

these young people marry, my dear Miss Agatha, their family may be increased by inmates who will pay no board."

This was what he had the assurance to say to an unmarried lady in her own house—and to laugh and chuckle at it afterwards, as if he thought it a capital joke. Aunt Agatha was struck dumb with horror and indignation. Such eventualities might indeed, perhaps must, be discussed by the lawyers where there are settlements to make; but to talk of them to a maiden lady when alone, was enough to make her drop through the very floor with consternation. She made no attempt to answer, but she did succeed in keeping her seat, and to a certain extent her self-possession, for Winnie's sake.

"It is a different sort of thing altogether," said the family adviser. "Things may be kept square in a quiet lady's house—though even that is not always the case, as we are both aware; but two young married people, who are just as likely as not to be extravagant and all that—— If he has not something to settle on her, I don't see how I can have anything to do with it," Mr. Penrose continued; "and you will not answer me as to what he has of his own."

"He has his—his pay," said poor Aunt Agatha. "I am told it is a great deal better than it used

to be; and he has, I think, some—some money in the Funds. I am sure he will be glad to settle that on Winnie; and then his mother, and Sir Edward. I have no doubt, myself, though really they are too young to marry, that they will do very well on the whole."

"Do you know what living means, Miss Agatha?" asked Mr. Penrose, solemnly, "when you can speak in this loose way? Butchers' bills are not so vague as your statements, I can tell you; and a pretty girl like that ought to do very well, even though she has no money. It is not *her* fault, poor thing," the rich uncle added, with momentary compassion; and then he asked, abruptly, "What will Sir Edward do for them?" as if he had presented a pistol at his companion's head.

"Oh, Mr. Penrose!" cried Aunt Agatha, forgetting all her policy, and what she had just said. "Surely, surely, you would not like them to calculate upon Sir Edward! He is not even a relation. He is only Edward's godfather. I would not have him applied to, not for the world."

"Then what have you been talking to me all this while about?" cried Mr. Penrose, with a look and sense of outraged virtue. And Aunt Agatha, seeing how she had betrayed her own

position, and weary of the contest, and driven to her wits' end, gave way and cried a little—which at that moment, vexed, worried, and mortified as she was, was all she could do.

And then Mr. Penrose got up and walked away, whistling audibly, through the open window, into the garden, leaving the chintz cover on his chair so crumpled up and loosened out of all its corners, that you could have told a mile off that a man had been there. What he left behind him was not that subtle agreeable suggestion of his presence which hung around the footsteps of young Percival, or even of Sir Edward, but something that felt half like an insult to the feminine inhabitants—a disagreeable assertion of another kind of creature who thought himself superior to them—which was an opinion which they did not in the least share, having no illusions so far as he went. Aunt Agatha sank back into her chair with a sense of relief, which she afterwards felt she ought not to have entertained. She had no right to such a feeling, for she had done no good; and instead of diverting the common enemy from an attack upon Winnie or her lover, had actually roused and whetted him, and made him more likely than ever to rush at those young victims, as soon as ever he should have the chance. But notwithstanding, for the

moment to be rid of him, and able to draw breath a little, and dry her incipient tears, and put the cover straight upon that ill-used chair, did her good. She drew a long breath, poor soul, and felt the ease and comfort of being left to herself; even though next moment she might have to brace herself up and collect all her faculties, and face the adversary again.

But in the meantime he had gone out to the garden, and was standing by Mary's side, with his hand in his pocket. He was telling Mary that he had come out in despair to her, to see if she knew anything about this sad business—since he found her Aunt Agatha quite as great a fool about business matters as she always was. He wanted to know if she, who knew what was what, could give him any sort of a reasonable idea about this young fellow whom Winnie wanted to marry—which was as difficult a question for Mrs. Ochterlony as it had been for Miss Seton. And then in the midst of the conversation the two culprits themselves appeared, as careless about the inquiring uncle as they were about the subject of his anxiety. Winnie, who was not given to the reticences practised by her aunt and her sister, had taken care to convey a very clear idea of her Uncle Penrose, and her own opinion of him, to the mind of Percival.

He was from Liverpool, and not "of a nice class." He was not Winnie's guardian, nor had he any legal control over her; and in these circumstances it did not seem by any means necessary to either of the young people to show any undue attention to his desires, or be disturbed by his interference; for neither of them had been brought up to be dutiful to all the claims of nature, like their seniors. "Go away directly, that he may not have any chance of attacking you," Winnie had said to her lover; for though she was not self-denying or unselfish to speak of, she could be so where Percival was concerned. "We can manage him among us," she added, with a laugh—for she had no doubt of the co-operation of both her aunt and sister, in the case of Uncle Penrose. And in obedience to this arrangement, Captain Percival did nothing but take off his hat in honour of Mary, and say half a dozen words of the most ordinary salutation to the stranger before he went away. And then Winnie came in, and came to her sister's side, and stood facing Mr. Penrose, in all the triumph and glory of her youth. She was beautiful, or would be beautiful, everybody had long allowed; but she had still retained a certain girlish meagreness up to a very recent date. Now all that had changed, like everything else;

she had expanded, it appeared, as her heart expanded and was satisfied—everything about her looked rounder, fuller, and more magnificent. She came and stood before the Liverpool uncle, who was a man of business, and thinking of no such vanities, and struck him dumb with her splendour. He could talk as he liked to Aunt Agatha, or even to Mary in her widow's cap, but this radiant creature, all glowing with love and happiness, took away his breath. Perhaps it was then, for the first time in his life, that Mr. Penrose actually realized that there was something in the world for which a man might even get to be indifferent about the balance at his banker's. He gave an involuntary gasp; and though up to this moment he had thought of Winnie only as a child, he now drew back before her, and stopped whistling, and took his hand out of his pocket, which perhaps was as decided an act of homage as it was in him to pay.

But of course such a manifestation could not last. After another moment he gave a "humph" as he looked at her, and then his self-possession came back. "So that was your Captain, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, uncle, that was my Captain," said the dauntless Winnie, "and I hope you approve of him; though it does not matter if you don't,

for you know it is all settled, and nobody except my aunt and his mother has any right to say a word."

"If his mother is as wise a judge as your aunt——" said Mr. Penrose; but yet all the same, Winnie's boldness imposed upon him a little. It was impossible to imagine that a grand creature like this, who was not pale nor sentimental, nor of Agatha Seton's kind, could contemplate with such satisfaction any Captain who had asked her to marry him upon nothing a year.

"That is all very fine," Mr. Penrose added, taking courage; "you can make your choice as you please, but it is my business to look after the money. If you and your children come to me starving, twenty years hence, and ask how I could possibly let you marry such a——"

"Do you think you will be living in twenty years, Uncle Penrose?" said Winnie. "I know you are a great deal older than Aunt Agatha; —but if you are, we will not come, I promise you. We shall keep our starvation to ourselves."

"I can't tell how old your Aunt Agatha is," said Mr. Penrose, with natural offence; "and you must know, Miss Winnie, that this is not how you should talk to me."

"Very well, uncle," said the daring girl;

"but neither is your way the way to talk to me. You know I have made up my mind, and that everything is settled, and that it does not matter the least to me if Edward was a beggar; and you come here with your money, as if that was the only thing to be thought of. What do I care about money?—and you might try till the end of the world, and you never would break it off," she cried, flashing into a brilliant glow of passion and vehemence such as Mr. Penrose did not understand. He had expected to have a great deal of difficulty, but he had never expected to be defied after this fashion; and the wildness of her womanish folly made the good man sad.

"You silly girl!" he said, with profound pathos, "if you only knew what nonsense you were speaking. There is nobody in this world but cares about money; you can do nothing without it, and marry least of all. And you speak to me with such an example before your eyes; look at your sister Mary, how she has come with all those helpless children to be, most likely, a burden on her friends——"

"Uncle Penrose!" cried Winnie, putting up her two beautiful hands to stop his mouth; but Mr. Penrose was as plain-spoken as Winnie herself was, though in a different way.

"I know perfectly well she can hear me," he

said, "and she ought to hear me, and to read you a lesson. If Mary had been a sensible girl, and had married a man who could make proper settlements upon her, and make a provision for his family, do you think she would have required to come here to seek a shelter—do you think——"

"Oh, Mary, he is crazy; don't mind him!" cried Winnie, forgetting for the moment all about her own affairs, and clinging to her sister in real distress.

And then it was Mrs. Ochterlony's turn to speak.

"I did not come to seek a shelter," she said; "though I know they would have given it me all the same. I came to seek love and kindness, uncle, which you cannot buy with money: and if there was nothing more than want of money between Winnie and Captain Percival——"

"Mary!" cried Winnie, impetuously, "go in and don't say any more. You shall not be insulted while I am here; but don't say anything about Edward. Leave me to have it out with Uncle Penrose, and go away."

And somehow Mary obeyed. She would not have done it a month ago; but she was wearied of contention, and broken in spirit, and, instead of standing still and defending herself, she with-

drew from the two belligerents, who were both so ready to turn their arms against her, and went away. She went to the nursery, which was deserted: for her boys were still outside in the lingering daylight. None of them were able to advise, or even to sympathize with their mother. They could give her their childish love, but nothing else in the world. The others had all some one to consult, some one to refer to, but Mary was alone. Her heart beat dull and low, with no vehement offence at the bitter words she had just heard, but with a heavy despondency and sense of her solitude, which her very attitude showed—for she did not sit down, or lie down, or try to find any fictitious support, but stood up by the vacant fire-place with her eyes fixed upon nothing, holding unconsciously the little chain which secured her watch, and letting its beads drop one by one from her fingers. "Mary has come home to be a burden on her friends," said Uncle Penrose. She did not resent it wildly, as she might have done some time before, but pondered it with wondering pain and a dull sense of hopelessness. How did it happen that she, of all women, had come to such a position? what correspondence was there between that and all her past? and what was the future to be? which, even now, she could make no spasmodic changes

in, but must accept and endure. This was how Mary's mind was employed while Winnie, reckless and wilful, defied Uncle Penrose in the garden. For the time, the power of defying any one seemed to have died out of Mary's breast.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. PENROSE, however, was not a man of very lively feelings, and bore no malice against Winnie for her defiance, nor even against Mary, to whom he had been so cruel, which was more difficult. He was up again, cheerful and full of energy in the morning, ready for his mission. If Winnie began the world without something to live upon, or with any prospect of ever being a burden on her friends, at all events it would not be his fault. As it happened, Aunt Agatha received at the breakfast-table the usual invariable letter containing a solemn warning against Captain Percival, and she was affected by it, as she could not help always being affected; and the evident commotion it excited in the party was such that Mr. Penrose could not but notice it. When he insisted upon knowing what it was, he was met by what was, in reality, very skilful

fencing on Miss Seton's part, who was not destitute altogether of female skill and art; but Aunt Agatha's defence was made useless by the impetuosity of Winnie, who scorned disguise.

"Oh, let us hear it, please," she said, "let us hear. *We* know what it is about. It is some new story—some lie, about my poor Edward. They may save themselves the trouble. *I* would not believe one of them, if it was written on the wall like Belshazzar's feast; and if I did believe them I would not care," said Winnie, vehemently; and she looked across, as she never could help looking, to where her sister sat.

"What is it?" said Mr. Penrose; "something about your Captain? Miss Agatha, considering my interest in the matter, I hope you will let me hear all that is said."

"It is nothing, absolutely nothing," said Aunt Agatha, faltering. "It is only some foolish gossip, you know—garrison stories, and that sort of thing. He was a very young man, and was launched upon life by himself—and—and—I think I may say he must have been imprudent. Winnie, my dear love, my heart bleeds to say it, but he must have been imprudent. He must have entangled himself and—and—— And then there are always so many designing people about to lead poor young men astray," said Aunt

Agatha, trembling for the result of her explanation: while Winnie divided her attention between Mr. Penrose, before whom this new view of the subject was unfolded for the first time, and Mary, whom she regarded as a natural enemy and the probable origin of it all.

"Wild, I suppose?" said Mr. Penrose, with sublime calm. "They're all alike, for that matter. So long as he doesn't bet or gamble—that's how those confounded young fellows ruin themselves." And then he dismissed the subject with a wave of the hand. "I am going up to the Hall to talk it all over with Sir Edward, and see what can be done. This sort of penniless nonsense makes me sick," the rich man added; "and you women are the most unreasonable creatures—one might as well talk to a stone wall."

Thus it was that for once in their lives the two Miss Setons, Agatha and Winnie, found Uncle Penrose for the moment half divine; they looked at him with wide open eyes, with a wondering veneration. They were only women after all, and had been giving themselves a great deal of trouble about Captain Percival's previous history; but it all sank into mere contemptible gossip under the calm glance of Mr. Penrose. He was not enthusiastic about Edward, and therefore his

impartial calm was all the more satisfying. *He* thought nothing of it all, though it had been driving *them* distracted. When he went away on his mission to the Hall, Winnie, in her enthusiasm, ran into Aunt Agatha's arms.

"You see he does not mind," said Winnie,—though an hour before she had been far from thinking Mr. Penrose an authority. "He thinks it is all gossip and spite, as I always said."

And Aunt Agatha for her part was quite overcome by the sudden relief. It felt like a deliverance, though it was only Mr. Penrose's opinion. "My dear love, men know the world," she said; "that is the advantage of having somebody to talk to; and I always said that your uncle, though he is sometimes disagreeable, had a great deal of sense. You see he knows the world."

"Yes, I suppose he must have sense," said Winnie; and in the comfort of her heart she was ready to attribute all good gifts to Mr. Penrose, and could have kissed him as he walked past the window with his hand in his pocket. She would not have forsaken her Edward whatever had been found out about him, but still to see that his wickedness (if he had been wicked) was of no consequence in the eyes of a respectable man like Uncle Penrose, was such a consolation even to Winnie as nothing can express.

"We are all a set of women, and we have been making a mountain out of a molehill," she said, and the tears came to her bright eyes; and then, as Mary was not moved into any such demonstrations of delight, Winnie turned her arms upon her sister in pure gaiety of heart.

"Everybody gets talked about," she said. "Edward was telling me about Mary even—that she used to be called Madonna Mary at the station; and that there was some poor gentleman that died. I supposed he thought she ought to be worshipped like Our Lady. Didn't you feel dreadfully guilty and wretched, Mary, when he died?"

"Poor boy," said Mrs. Ochterlony, who had recovered her courage a little with the morning light. "It had nothing to do with Our Lady as you say; it was only because he had been brought up in Italy, poor fellow, and was fond of the old Italian poets, and the soft Italian words."

"Then perhaps it was Madonna Mary he was thinking of," said Winnie, with gay malice, "and you must have felt a dreadful wretch when he died."

"We felt very sad when he died," said Mary, —"he was only twenty, poor boy: but, Winnie dear, Uncle Penrose is not an angel, and I think now I will say my say. Captain Percival is very

fond of you, and you are very fond of him, and I think, whatever the past may have been, that there is hope if you will be a little serious. It is of consequence. Don't you think that I wish all that is best in the world for you, my only little sister? And why should you distrust me? You are not silly nor weak, and I think you might do well yet, very well, my dear, if you were really to try."

"I think we shall do very well without trying," said Winnie, partly touched and partly indignant; "but it is something for you to say, Mary, and I am sure I am much obliged to you for your good advice all the same."

"Winnie," said Mrs. Ochterlony, taking her hands, "I know the world better than you do—perhaps even better than Uncle Penrose, so far as a woman is concerned. I don't care if you are rich or poor, but I want you to be happy. It will not do very well without trying. I will not say a word about him, for you have set your heart on him, and that must be enough. And some women can do everything for the people they love. I think, perhaps, you could, if you were to give your heart to it, and try."

It was not the kind of address Winnie had expected, and she struggled against it, trying hard to resist the involuntary softening. But

after all nature was yet in her, and she could not but feel that what Mary was saying came from her heart.

"I don't see why you should be so serious," she said; "but I am sure it is kind of you, Mary. I—I don't know if I could do—what you say; but whatever I can do I will for Edward!" she added hastily, with a warmth and eagerness which brought the colour to her cheek and the light to her eye; and then the two sisters kissed each other as they had never done before, and Winnie knelt down by Mary's knee, and the two held each other's hands, and clung together, as it was natural they should, in that confidence of nature which is closer than any other except that between mother and daughter —the fellow-feeling of sisters, destined to the same experience, one of whom has gone far in advance, and turning back can trace, step by step, in her own memory, the path the other has to go.

"Don't mistrust me, Winnie," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "I have had a little to bear, though I have been very happy, and I could tell you many things—though I will not, just now; but, Winnie dear, what I want is, that you should make up your mind to it; not to have everything you like, and live in a fairy tale, but to keep

right, and to keep *him* right. If you will promise to think of this, and to take it bravely upon you, I will still hope that all may be well."

Her look was so serious that for the first time Winnie's heart forgave her. Neither jealousy, nor ill-temper, nor fear of evil report on her own side could have looked out of Mary's eyes at her little sister with such a wistful longing gaze. Winnie was moved in spite of herself, and thrilled by the first pang of uncertainty that had yet touched her. If Mary had no motive but natural affection, was it then really a hideous gulf of horrible destruction, on the verge of which she was herself tripping so lightly? Something indefinable came over Winnie's face as that thought moved her. Should it be so, what then? If it was to save him, if it was to perish with him, what did it matter? the only place in the world for her was by his side. She had made her choice, and there was no other choice for her, no alternative even should she see the gulf as Curtius did, and leap conscious into it in the eye of day. All this passed through her mind in a moment, as she knelt by Mary's side holding her hands—and came out so on her face that Mary could read something like it in the sudden changing of the fair features and expansion of the eyes.

It was as if the soul had been startled, and sprang up to those fair windows, to look out upon the approaching danger, making the spectator careless of their beauty, out of regard to the nobler thing that used them for the moment. Then Winnie rose up suddenly, and gave her sister a hearty kiss, and threw off her sudden gravity as if it had been a cloud.

"Enough of that," she said; "I will try and be good, and so I think will—we all. And Mary, don't look so serious. I mean to be happy, at least as long as I can," cried Winnie. She was the same Winnie again—gay, bold, and careless, before five minutes had passed; and Mary had said her say, and there was now no more to add. Nothing could change the destiny which the thoughtless young creature had laid out for herself. If she could have foreseen the distinctest wretchedness it would have been all the same. She was ready to take the plunge even into the gulf—and nothing that could be said or done could change it now.

In the meantime, Mr. Penrose had gone up to the Hall to talk it over with Sir Edward, and was explaining his views with a distinctness which was not much more agreeable in the Hall than it had been in the Cottage. "I cannot let it go on unless some provision can be made," he

said. "Winnie is very handsome, and you must all see she might have done a great deal better. If I had her over in Liverpool, as I have several times thought of doing, I warrant you the settlements would have been of a different description. She might have married anybody, such a girl as that," continued Mr. Penrose, in a regretful business way. It was so much capital lost that might have brought in a much greater profit; and though he had no personal interest in it, it vexed him to see people throwing their chances away.

"That may be, but it is Edward Percival she chooses to marry, and nobody else," said Sir Edward testily; "and she is not a girl to do as you seem to think, exactly as she is told."

"We should have seen about that," said Mr. Penrose; "but in the meantime, he has his pay and she has a hundred a year. If Mrs. Percival will settle three hundred on him, and you, perhaps, two——"

"I, two!" cried Sir Edward, with sudden terror; "why should I settle two? You might as well tell me to retire from the Hall, and leave them my house. And pray, Mr. Penrose, when you are so liberal for other people, what do you mean to give yourself?"

"I am a family man," said Uncle Penrose,

taking his other hand out of his pocket, "and what I can give must be, in justice to my family, very limited. But Mrs. Percival, who has only four sons, and yourself who have none, are in very different circumstances. If he had had a father, the business might have been entered into more satisfactorily—but as you are his godfather, I hear——"

"I never understood before, up to this minute," said Sir Edward, with great courtesy, "that it was the duty of a godfather to endow his charge with two hundred a year."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Edward," said Mr. Penrose; "I am a plain man, and I treat things in a business way. I give my godchildren a silver mug, and feel my conscience clear: but if I had introduced a young man, not otherwise very eligible, to a handsome girl, who might have done a great deal better for herself, that would make a great difference in the responsibility. Winnie Seton is of very good family by her father's side, as you know, I suppose, better than I do; and of very good business connexions by her mother's; and her beauty is first-rate,—I don't think there can be any doubt about that. If she had been an ordinary pretty girl, I would not have said so much; but with all her advantages, I should say that any fair equivalent in

the shape of a husband should be worth at least five thousand a year."

Mr. Penrose spoke with such seriousness that Sir Edward was awed out of his first feeling of amusement. He restrained his smile, and acknowledged the logic. "But I did not introduce him in any special way," he said. "If I can negotiate with Mrs. Percival for a more liberal allowance, I will do it. She has an estate of her own, and she is free to leave it to any of her sons: but Edward, I fear, has been rather unsatisfactory——"

"Ah, wild?" said Mr. Penrose: "all young men are alike for that. I think, on the whole, that it is you who should negotiate with the mother. You know her better than I do, and have known all about it from the beginning, and you could show her the state of the case better. If such a mad thing could be consented to by anybody in their senses, it must at least be apparent that Winnie would bring twice as much as the other into the common stock. If she were with me in Liverpool she would not long be Winnie Seton; and you may trust me she should marry a man who was worthy of her," the rich uncle added, with a confirmatory nod of his head. When he spoke of a man who would be worthy of Winnie, he meant no senti-

mental fitness such as Aunt Agatha would have meant, had she said these words, nor was it even moral worth he was thinking of. What Mr. Penrose meant, was a man who would bring a fair equivalent in silver and gold to Winnie's beauty and youth, and he meant it most seriously, and could not but groan when he contemplated the possibility of so much valuable capital being thrown away.

And he felt that he had made a good impression when he went back to the Cottage. He seemed to himself to have secured Mrs. Percival's three hundred a-year, and even Sir Edward's more problematical gift to the young people; and he occupied the interval in thinking of a silver tea-service which had rather caught his fancy, in a shop window, and which he thought if his negotiations succeeded, he would give to his niece for a wedding present. If they did not succeed it would be a different question—for a young woman who married upon a captain's pay and a hundred a-year of her own, would have little occasion for a silver tea-service. So Mr. Penrose mused as he returned to the Cottage. Under the best of circumstances it was now evident that there could be nothing to "settle" upon Winnie. The mother and the friends might make up a little income, but as for capital

—which after all was what Mr. Penrose prized most—there was none in the whole matter, except that which Winnie had in her face and person, and was going to throw so lamentably away. Mr. Penrose could not but make some reflections on Aunt Agatha's feminine idiocy and the cruel heedlessness of Sir Edward, as he walked along the rural road. A girl who had so many advantages, whose husband, to be worthy of her, should have had five thousand a-year at the least, and something handsome to "settle"—and yet her natural guardians had suffered her to get engaged to a captain in a marching regiment, with only his pay! No wonder that Mr. Penrose was sad. But he went home with a sense that, painful as the position was, *he* had done his duty, at least.

This was how Winnie's marriage got itself accomplished notwithstanding all opposition. Captain Percival was the second of his mother's four sons, and consequently the natural heir of her personal fortune if he had not been "foolish," as she said; and the thought that it might be the saving of him, which was suggested by Sir Edward, was naturally a very moving argument. A beautiful young wife whom he was very fond of, and who was ready to enter with him into all the risks of life,—if that did not keep him

right, what would? And after all he was only five-and-twenty, an age at which reformation was quite possible. So his friends thought, persuading themselves with natural sophistry that the influence of love and a self-willed girl of eighteen would do what all other inducements had failed to do; and as for *her* friends, they were so elated to see that in the eyes of Uncle Penrose the young man's faults bore only the most ordinary aspect, and counted for next to nothing, that their misgivings all but disappeared, and their acceptance of the risk was almost enthusiastic. Sometimes indeed a momentary shadow would cross the mind of Aunt Agatha—sometimes a doubt would change Sir Edward's countenance—but then these two old people were believers in love, and besides had the faculty of believing what they wished to believe, which was a still more important circumstance. And Mary for her part had said her say. The momentary hope she had felt in Winnie's strength of character, and in her love—a hope which had opened her heart to speak to her sister—found but little to support it after that moment. She could not go on protesting, and making her presence a thorn in the flesh of the excited household; and if she felt throughout all a sense that the gulf was still there, though all

these flowers had been strewed over it—a sense of the terrible risk which was so poorly counterbalanced by the vaguest and most doubtful of hopes—still Mary was aware that this might be simply the fault of her position, which led her to look upon everything with a less hopeful eye. She was the spectator, and she saw what was going on as the actors themselves could not be expected to see it. She saw Winnie's delight at the idea of freedom from all restraint—and she saw Percival's suppressed impatience of the anxious counsels addressed to him, and the look which Winnie and he exchanged on such occasions, as if assuring each other that in spite of all this they would take their own way. And then Mrs. Ochterlony's own relations with the bridegroom were not of a comfortable kind. He knew apparently by instinct that she was not his friend, and he approached her with a solemn politeness under which Mary, perhaps oversensitive on that point, felt that a secret sneer was concealed. And he made references to her Indian experiences, with a certain subtle implication of something in them which he knew and nobody else did—something which would be to Mrs. Ochterlony's injury should it be known—which awoke in Mary an irritation and exasperation which nothing else could have produced.

She avoided him as much as it was possible to avoid him during the busy interval before the marriage, and he perceived it and thought it was fear, and the sneer that lay under his courtesy became more and more evident. He took to petting little Wilfrid with an evident consciousness of Mary's vexation and the painful effect it produced upon her; not Hugh nor Islay, who were of an age to be a man's plaything, but the baby, who was too young for any but a woman's interest; and Captain Percival was not the kind of man who is naturally fond of children. When she saw her little boy on her future brother-in-law's knee, Mary felt her heart contract with an involuntary shiver, of which she could have given no clear explanation. She did not know what she was afraid of, but she was afraid.

Perhaps it was a relief to them all when the marriage day arrived—which had to be shortly, for the regiment was ordered to Malta, and Captain Percival had already had all the leave he could ask for. Mr. Penrose's exertions had been crowned with such success that when he came to Winnie's wedding he brought her the silver tea-service which in his heart he had decided conditionally to give her as a marriage

gift. Mrs. Percival had decided to settle two hundred and fifty pounds a-year upon her son, which was very near Mr. Penrose's mark; and Sir Edward, after long pondering upon the subject, and a half-amused, half-serious, consideration of Winnie's capital which was being thrown away, had made up his mind to a still greater effort. He gave the young man in present possession what he had left him in his will, which was a sum of five thousand pounds—a little fortune to the young soldier. "You might have been my son, my boy, if your mother and I could have made up our minds," the old baronet said, with a momentary weakness; though if anybody else had suggested such an idea no doubt Sir Edward would have said, "Heaven forbid!" And Mr. Penrose pounced upon it and had it settled upon Winnie, and was happy, though the bridegroom resisted a little. After that there could be no doubt about the tea-service. "If you should ever be placed in Mary's position you will have something to fall back upon," Uncle Penrose said; "or even if you should not get on together, you know." It was not a large sum, but the difficulty there had been about getting it, and the pleasant sense that it was wholly owing to his

own exertions, made it sweet to the man of capital, and he gave his niece his blessing and the tea-service with a full heart.

As for Winnie, she was radiant in her glow of beauty and happiness on that momentous day. A thunder-shower of sudden tears when she signed the register, and another when she was taking leave of Aunt Agatha, was all that occurred to overcloud her brightness; and even these did not overcloud her, but were in harmony—hot, violent, and sudden as they were—with the passionate happiness and emancipation of the married girl. She kissed over and over again her tender guardian—who for her part sat speechless and desolate to see her child go away, weeping with a silent anguish which could not find any words—and dropped that sudden shower over Aunt Agatha's gown; but a moment after threw back the veil which had fallen over her face, and looked back from the carriage window upon them in a flush of joy, and pride, and conscious freedom, which, had no other sentiments been called for at the moment, it would have done one's heart good to see. She was so happy that she could not cry, nor be sentimental, nor think of broken links, as she said—and why should she pretend to be sad about parting? Which was very

true, no doubt, from Winnie's point of view. And there was not the vestige of a cloud about when she waved her hand to them for the last time as she drove away. She was going away to the world and life, to see everything and enjoy everything, and have her day. Why should not she show her delight? While poor old Aunt Agatha, whose day was so long over, fell back into Mary's arms, who was standing beside her, and felt that now at last and finally, her heart was broken, and the joy of her life gone. Was it not simply the course of nature and the way of the world?

CHAPTER V.

THERE followed after this a time of such tranquillity as had never yet entered into Mrs. Ochterlony's life. Mary had known joy, and she had known sorrow, as people do to whom life comes with full hands, giving and taking; but it had always been life, busy and personal, which left her little leisure for anything beyond the quickly recurring duties of the hour and day. She had had no time to watch the current how it flowed, being as it were part of it, and going along with it in its ceaseless course. But now all this was changed. After Winnie's marriage a sudden tranquillity fell upon the ladies in the Cottage. Life had gone on and left them; they were no longer going with the tide, but standing by upon the bank watching it. They were not unhappy, nor was their existence sad,—for the three boys were world enough to satisfy the two women and

keep them occupied and cheerful; and when the children were asleep, Aunt Agatha and her niece were, as people say, company for each other, and talked over their work as they sat by the evening lamp, or in the twilight garden, which was always so green and so sweet,—and were content, or more than content; but still sometimes Mrs. Ochterlony would bethink herself, and it would seem as a dream to her that she, too, had once taken her part with the others and gone with the stream, and suffered cruel sufferings and tasted sudden joys, and been Hugh Ochterlony's wife. Was it so? Or had she never been but with Aunt Agatha by the little river that ran steadily one day like another under the self-same trees? This strange sense of unreality in the past turned her giddy by times, and made her head swim and the world to go round and round; but, to be sure, she never spoke of these sensations, and life continued, and the boys grew, and everything went very well at Kirtell-side.

Everything went so well that Aunt Agatha many a day pitied the poor people who were out in the world, or the young men who set out from the parish to begin their career, and would say, "Oh, if they but knew how much better everybody is at home!" Mary was younger, and

perhaps she was not quite of the same mind; but still it was peace that had fallen upon her and was wrapping her all round like a garment. There was the same quiet routine every day; the same things to do, the same places to walk to, the same faces to see. Nothing unforeseen ever arrived to break the calm. When Hugh was old enough to begin serious lessons, a curate turned up in the course of nature who took pupils, and to whom Islay, too, went by-and-by, and even little Wilfrid, who was always delicate. The boys went to him with shining morning faces, and came back growing louder and stronger, and, as Peggy said, more "stirring" every day. And Sir Edward made his almost daily visit, and let a thin and gentle echo of the out-of-door din into the Cottage quiet. He told them in his mild way what was going on, and talked about the news in the papers, and about the books reviewed, and about the occasional heavenly visitant in the shape of a new publication that found its way to Kirtell-side. There were few magazines then, and no cheap ones, and a single *Blackwood* did for a good many families. Sir Edward himself, who had been always considered intellectual, took in the *Edinburgh* all for himself, and lent it to his neighbours; but then it could not be expected that

many people in a district could be so magnificent as that. When the Curate, on the other hand, came to tea (he was not the sort of man, as Aunt Agatha said, that one would think of making a dinner for), it was all about the parish that he talked; and as Mrs. Ochterlony was a perverse woman in her way, and had her own ideas about her poor neighbours, such conversation was not so interesting to her as it might have been. But it was in this sort of way that she spent the next ten or twelve years of her life.

As for Winnie, she was having her day, as she had said, and was, it is to be supposed, enjoying it. She wrote letters regularly and diligently, which is one point in which a woman, however little elevated she may be above her masculine companion in other respects, always has the better of him. And she possessed a true feminine gift which ought also to be put in the compensating scale against those female drawbacks which are so often insisted upon. Sometimes she was ill-tempered, sometimes bitter in her letters, for the honeymoon happiness naturally did not last for ever; but, whatever mood Winnie might be in, she always threw an unconscious halo of interest around herself when she wrote. It was, as everybody might see, an

instinctive and unpremeditated act, but it was successful to the highest extent. Whether she described her triumphs or her disappointments, her husband's kindness or his carelessness, their extravagant living or their want of money, Winnie herself, in the foreground of the picture, was always charmingly, and sometimes touchingly, posed. A word or two did it, and it was done to perfection; and the course of her history thus traced was followed by Aunt Agatha with an unfailing enthusiasm. She herself went through it all in the person of her favourite, and Mary connected herself with a vague but still fairer future in the persons of her boys. And thus the peaceful existence went on day by day, with nothing more serious to trouble it than a transitory childish ailment, or a passing rumour that the Percivals were "going too fast," or did not "get on,"—clouds which only floated mistily and momentarily about the horizon, and never came down to trouble the quiet waters. It was a time which left no record, and which by times felt languid and lingering to the younger woman, who was still too young to be altogether satisfied with so dead a calm in the middle of her existence; but still, perhaps, it was, on the whole, the happiest time of Mary's life.

This halcyon time lasted until the boys were

so far grown up as to bring the disturbing plans and speculations of their beginning life into the household calm. It lasted until Islay was sixteen and ready to pass his examination for Woolwich, the long-headed boy having fixed his affections upon scientific soldiership in a way which was slightly disappointing to his mother, who, as was natural, had thought him capable of a more learned profession. It roused the Cottage into something like a new stage of existence to think of and prepare for the entry of its nursling into that great vague unseen sphere which Aunt Agatha called the world. But, after all, it was not Islay who was the troublesome member of the family. He had fixed his thoughts upon his chosen profession almost as soon as he knew what was meant by his father's sword, which had hung in Mrs. Ochterlony's room from his earliest recollection; and though there might be a little anxiety about how he would succeed at his examination, and how he would get on when he left home, still Islay was so steady that no one felt any alarm or absolute disquiet about him.

But it was rather different with Hugh. Hugh was supposed to be his uncle's heir, and received as such wherever he went, with perhaps more enthusiasm than might have fallen to his share

merely as Mary's son. He was heir presumptive, recognised to a certain extent at Earlston itself as elsewhere in that capacity; and yet Mr. Ochterlony had not, so far as anybody was aware, made any distinct decision, and might still alter his mind, and, indeed, was not too old to marry and have heirs of his own, which was a view of the subject chiefly taken by Aunt Agatha. And, to aggravate the position, Hugh was far from being a boy of fixed resolutions, like his brother. He was one of the troublesome people, who have no very particular bias. He liked everything that was pleasant. He was not idle, nor had he any evil tendencies; he was fond of literature in a way, and at the same time fond of shooting and hunting, and all the occupations and amusements of a country life. Public opinion in the country-side proclaimed him one of the nicest young fellows going; and if he had been Francis Ochterlony's son, and indisputably the heir of Earlston, Hugh would have been as satisfactory a specimen of a budding country gentleman as could have been found. But the crook in his lot was, that he was the heir presumptive, and at the same time was generous and proud and high-spirited, and not the kind of nature which could lie in wait for another man's place, or build his fortunes upon another man's gene-

rosity. His own opinion, no doubt, was that he had a right to Earlston; but he was far too great a Quixote, too highly fantastical in youthful pride and independence, to permit any one to say that it was his uncle's duty to provide for him. And withal, he did not himself know what manner of life to take up, or what to do. He would have made a good soldier, or a good farmer, different though the two things are; and would have filled, as well as most people, almost any other practical position which Providence or circumstances had set clearly before him. But no intuitive perception of what he was most fit for was in him to enlighten his way; and at the same time he began to be highly impatient, being eighteen, and a man as he thought, of waiting and doing nothing, and living at home.

"If we could but have sent him to Oxford," Aunt Agatha said; "if I had the means!"—but it is very doubtful whether she ever could have had the means; and of late Aunt Agatha too had been disturbed in her quiet. Her letters to Winnie had begun to convey enclosures of which she did not speak much, even to Mrs. Ochterlony, but which were dead against any such possibility for Hugh.

"If I had been brought up at school where I might have got a scholarship, or something,"

said Hugh; "but I don't know why I should want to go to Oxford. We must send Will if we can, mother; he has the brains for it. Oxford is too grand an idea for me——"

"Not if you are to have Earlston, Hugh," said his mother.

"I wish Earlston was at the bottom of the sea," cried the poor boy; "but for Earlston, one would have known what one was good for. I wish my uncle would make up his mind and found a hospital with it, or marry, as Aunt Agatha says——"

"He will never marry," said Mary; "he was a great deal older than your father; he is quite an old man."

"Indeed, Mary, he is not old at all, for a man," said Aunt Agatha, with eagerness. "Ladies are so different. He might get a very nice wife yet, and children, for anything any one could tell. Not too young, you know—I think it would be a great pity if he were to marry anybody too young; but a nice person, of perhaps forty or so," said Aunt Agatha; and she rounded off her sentence with a soft little sigh.

"He will never marry, I am sure," said Mary, almost with indignation; for, not to speak of the injustice to Hugh, it sounded like an im-

putation upon her brother-in-law, who was sober-minded, and not thinking of anything so foolish; not to say that his heart was with his marble Venus, and he was indifferent to any other love.

"Well, if you think so, my dear——" said Miss Seton; and a faint colour rose upon her soft old cheek. She thought Mary's meaning was, that after his behaviour to herself, which was not exactly what people expected, he was not likely to entertain another affection; which was probably as true as any other theory of Mr. Ochterlony's conduct. Aunt Agatha thought this was Mary's meaning, and it pleased her. It was an old story, but still she remembered it so well, that it was pleasant to think *he* had not forgotten. But this, to be sure, had very little to do with Hugh.

"I wish he would marry," said his heir presumptive, "or put one out of pain one way or another. Things can't go on for ever like this. Islay is only sixteen, and he is starting already; and here am I eighteen past, and good for nothing. You would not like me to be a useless wretch all my life?" said Hugh, severely, turning round upon his mother, who was not prepared for such an address; but Hugh, of all the boys, was the one most like his father, and had the Major's "way."

"No," cried Mary, a little alarmed, "anything but that. I still think you might wait a little, and see what your uncle means. You are not so very old. Well, my dear boy! don't be impatient; tell me what you wish to do."

But this was exactly what Hugh could not tell. "If there had been no Earlston in the question, one would have known," he said. "It is very hard upon a fellow to be another man's nephew. I think the best thing I could do would be to ignore Earlston altogether, and go in for—anything I could make my own living by. There's Islay has had the first chance——"

"My dear, one is surely enough in a family to be a soldier," said Aunt Agatha, "if you would consider your poor mamma's feelings and mine; but I never thought, for my part, that *that* was the thing for Islay, with his long head. He had always such a very peculiar head. When he was a child, you know, Mary, we never could get a child's hat to fit him. Now, I think, if Hugh had gone into a very nice regiment, and Islay had studied for something——"

"Do you think he will have no study to do, going in for the Engineers?" said Hugh,

indignantly. "I am not envious of Islay. I know he is the best fellow among us; but, at the same time— The thing for me would be to go to Australia or New Zealand, where one does not need to be good for anything in particular. That is my case," said the disconsolate youth; and out of the depths, if not of his soul, at least of his capacious chest, there came a profound, almost despairing sigh.

"Oh, Hugh, my darling boy! you cannot mean to break all our hearts," cried Aunt Agatha.

It was just what poor Hugh meant to do, for the moment, at least; and he sat with his head down and despair in his face, with a look which went to Mary's heart, and brought the tears to her eyes, but a smile to her lips. He was so like his father; and Mrs. Ochterlony knew that he would not, in this way, at least, break her heart.

"Would you like to go to Uncle Penrose?" she said; to which Hugh replied with a vehement shake of his head. "Would you like to go into Mr. Allonby's office? You know he spoke of wanting an articled pupil. Would you think of that proposal Mr. Mortare, the architect, made us?—don't shake your head off, Hugh; or ask Sir Edward to let you help old

Sanders—or—or— Would you *really* like to be a soldier, like your brother?" said Mary, at her wits' end; for after this, with their limited opportunities, there seemed no further suggestion to make.

"I must do something, mother," said Hugh, and he rose up with another sigh; "but I don't want to vex you," he added, coming up and putting his arms round her with that admiring fondness which is perhaps sweeter to a woman from her son than even from her lover; and then, his mind being relieved, he had no objection to change the conversation. "I promised to look at the young colts, and tell Sir Edward what I thought of them," he suddenly said, looking up at Mary with a cloudy, doubtful look—afraid of being laughed at, and yet himself ready to laugh—such as is not unusual upon a boy's face. Mrs. Ochterlony did not feel in the least inclined for laughter, though she smiled upon her boy; and when he went away, a look of anxiety came to her face, though it was not anything like the tragical anxiety which contracted Aunt Agatha's gentle countenance. She took up her work again, which was more than Miss Seton could do. The boys were no longer children, and life was

coming back to her with their growing years. Life which is not peace, but more like a sword.

"My dear love, something must be done," said Aunt Agatha. "Australia or New Zealand, and for a boy of his expectations! Mary, something must be done."

"Yes," said Mary. "I must go and consult my brother-in-law about it, and see what he thinks best. But as for New Zealand or Australia, Aunt Agatha——"

"Do you think it will be *nice*, Mary?" said Miss Seton, with a soft blush like a girl's. "It will be like asking him, you know, what he means; it will be like saying he ought to provide——"

"He said Hugh was to be his heir," said Mary, "and I believe he meant what he said; at all events, it would be wrong to do anything without consulting him, for he has always been very kind."

These words threw Aunt Agatha into a flutter which she could not conceal. "It may be very well to consult him," she said; "but rather than let him think we are asking his help—— And then, how can you see him, Mary? I am afraid it would be—awkward, to say the least, to ask him here——"

"I will go to Earlston to morrow," said Mary. "I made up my mind while Hugh was talking. After Islay has gone, it will be worse for Hugh. Will is so much younger, poor boy."

"Will," said Aunt Agatha, sighing. "Oh, Mary, if they had only been girls! we could have brought them up without any assistance, and no bother about professions or things. When you have settled Hugh and Islay, there will be Will to open it up again; and they will all leave us, after all. Oh, Mary, my dear love, if they had been but girls!"

"Yes, but they are not girls," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with a half smile; and then she too sighed. She was glad her boys were boys, and had more confidence in them, and Providence and life, than Aunt Agatha had. But she was not glad to think that her boys must leave her, and that she had no daughter to share her household life. The cloud which sat on Aunt Agatha's careful brow came over her, too for the moment, and dimmed her eyes, and made her heart ache. "They came into the world for God's uses and not for ours," she said, recovering herself, "and though they are boys, we must not keep them unhappy. I will go over to Earlston to-morrow by the early train."

"If you think it right," said Miss Seton: but it was not cordially spoken. Aunt Agatha was very proud and sensitive in her way. She was the kind of woman to get into misunderstandings, and shun explanations, as much as if she had been a woman in a novel. She was as ready to take up a mistaken idea, and as determined not to see her mistake, as if she had been a heroine forced thereto by the exigencies of three volumes. Miss Seton had never come to the third volume herself; she thought it more dignified for her own part to remain in the complications and perplexities of the second; and it struck her that it was indelicate of Mary thus to open the subject, and lead Francis Ochterlony on, as it were, to declare his mind.

The question was quite a different one so far as Mary was concerned, to whom Francis Ochterlony had never stood in the position of a lover, nor was the subject of any delicate difficulties. With her it was a straightforward piece of business enough to consult her brother-in-law, who was the natural guardian of her sons, and who had always been well disposed towards them, especially while they kept at a safe distance. Islay was the only one who had done any practical harm at Earlston, and Mr. Ochterlony had

forgiven and, it is to be hoped, forgotten the downfall of the rococo chair. If she had had nothing more important to trouble her than a consultation so innocent! Though, to tell the truth, Mary did not feel that she had a great deal to trouble her, even with the uncertainty of Hugh's future upon her hands. Even if his uncle were to contemplate anything so absurd as marriage or the founding of a hospital, Hugh could still make his own way in the world, as his brothers would have to do, and as his father had done before him. And Mrs. Ochterlony was not even overwhelmed by consideration of the very different characters of the boys, nor of the immense responsibility, nor of any of the awful thoughts with which widow-mothers are supposed to be overwhelmed. They were all well, God bless them; all honest and true, healthful and affectionate. Hugh had his crotchets and fidgety ways, but so had his father, and perhaps Mary loved her boy the better for them; and Wilfrid was a strange boy, but then he had always been strange, and it came natural to him. No doubt there might be undeveloped depths in both, of which their mother as yet knew nothing; but in the meantime Mary, like other mothers, took things as she saw them, and was proud of her sons, and

had no disturbing fears. As for Islay, he was steady as a rock, and almost as strong, and did the heart good to behold, and even the weakest woman might have taken heart to trust him, whatever might be the temptations and terrors of "the world." Mary had that composure which belongs to the better side of experience, as much as suspicion and distrust belong to its darker side. The world did not alarm her as it did Aunt Agatha; neither did Mr. Ochterlony alarm her, whose sentiments ought at least to be known by this time, and whose counsel she sought with no artful intention of drawing him out, but with an honest desire to have the matter settled one way or another. This was how the interval of calm passed away, and the new generation brought back a new and fuller life.

It was not all pleasure with which Mary rose next morning to go upon her mission to Earlston; but it was with a feeling of resurrection, a sense that she lay no longer ashore, but that the tide was once more creeping about her stranded boat, and the wind wooing the idle sail. There might be storms awaiting her upon the sea; storm and shipwreck and loss of all things lay in the future; possible for her boys as for others, certain for some; but that pricking, tingling thrill of danger and pain gave a certain vitality

to the stir of life renewed. Peace is sweet, and there are times when the soul sighs for it; but life is sweeter. And this is how Mary, in her mother's anxiety,—with all the possibilities of fate to affright her, if they could, yet not without a novel sense of exhilaration, her heart beating more strongly, her pulse fuller, her eye brighter,—went forth to open the door for her boy into his own personal and individual career.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was a cheerful summer morning when Mary set out on her visit to her brother-in-law. She had said nothing to her boys about it, for Hugh was fantastical, like Aunt Agatha, and would have denounced her intention as an expedient to make his uncle provide for him. Hugh had gone out to attend to some of the many little businesses he had in hand for Sir Edward; and Islay was working in his own room preparing for the "coach," to whom he was going in a few days; and Wilfrid, or Will, as everybody called him, was with his curate-tutor. The Cottage held its placid place upon the high bank of Kirtell, shining through its trees in a purple cloud of roses, and listening in the sun to that everlasting quiet voice that sung in its ear, summer and winter, the little river's changeful yet changeless song. It looked like a

place to which no changes could ever come; calm people in the stillness of age, souls at rest, little children, were the kind of people to live in it; and the stir and quickening of pleasurable pain which Mary felt in her own veins,—the sense of new life and movement about her,—felt out of place with the quiet house. Aunt Agatha was out of sight, ordering her household affairs; and the drawing-room was silent and deserted as a fairy palace, full of a thousand signs of habitation, but without a single tenant audible or visible, except the roses that clambered about the open windows, and the bee that went in and made a confused investigation, and came out again none the wiser. An odd sense of the contrast struck Mrs. Ochterlony; but a little while before, her soul had been in unison with the calm of the place, and she had thought nothing of it; now she had woke up out of that fair chamber turned to the sunrising, the name of which is Peace, and had stepped back into life, and felt the tingle and thrill of resurrection. And an unconscious smile came on her face as she looked back. To think that out of that silence and sunshine should pour out such a tide of new strength and vigour—and that henceforth hearts should leap with eagerness and wistfulness under that roof, and perhaps grow

wild with joy, or perhaps, God knows, break with anguish, as news came good or evil! She had been but half alive so long, that the sense of living was sweet.

It was a moment to call forth many thoughts and recollections, but the fact was that she did not have time to entertain them. There happened to her one of those curious coincidences which occur so often, and which it is so difficult to account for. Long before she reached the little station, a tall figure broke the long vacant line of the dusty country road, a figure which Mary felt at once to be that of a stranger, and yet one she seemed to recognise. She could not believe her eyes, nor think it was anything but the association of ideas which misled her, and laughed at her own fantastic imagination as she went on. But nevertheless it is true that it was her brother-in-law himself who met her, long before she reached the railway by which she had meant to go to him. Her appearance struck him too, it was evident, with a little surprise; but yet she was at home, and might have been going anywhere; whereas the strange fact of his coming required a more elaborate explanation than he had it in his power to give.

"I do not know exactly what put it into my head," said Mr. Ochterlony; "perhaps some old

work of mine which turned up the other day, and which I was doing when you were with me. I thought I would come over and have a talk with you about your boy."

"It is very strange," said Mary, "for this very morning I had made up my mind to come to you, to consult you. It must be some kind of magnetism, I suppose."

"Indeed, I can't say; I have never studied the natural sciences," said Mr. Ochterlony, with gravity. "I have had a very distinguished visitor lately: a man whose powers are as much above the common mind as his information is—Dr. Franklin, whose name of course you have heard—a man of European reputation."

"Yes," said Mary, doubtfully, feeling very guilty and ignorant, for to tell the truth she had never heard of Dr. Franklin; but her brother-in-law perceived her ignorance, and explained in a kind of compassionate way—

"He is about the greatest numismatist we have in England," said Mr. Ochterlony, "and somehow my little monograph upon primitive art in Iceland came to be talked of. I have never completed it, though Franklin expressed himself much interested—and I think that's how it was suggested to my mind to come and see you to-day."

"I am very glad," said Mary, "I wanted so much to have your advice. Hugh is almost a man now——"

"A man!" said Mr. Ochterlony, with a smile; "I don't see how that is possible. I hope he is not so unruly as he used to be; but you are as young as ever, and I don't see how your children can be men."

And oddly enough, just at that moment, Hugh himself made his appearance, making his way by a cross road down to the river, with his basket over his shoulder, and his fishing-rod. He was taller than his uncle, though Mr. Ochterlony was tall; and big besides, with large, mighty, not perfectly developed limbs, swinging a little loosely upon their hinges like the limbs of a young Newfoundland or baby lion. His face was still smooth as a girl's, and fair, with downy cheeks and his mother's eyes, and that pucker in his forehead which Francis Ochterlony had known of old in the countenance of another Hugh. Mary did not say anything, but she stopped short before her boy, and put her hand on his shoulder, and looked at his uncle with a smile, appealing to him with her proud eyes and beaming face, if this was not almost a man. As for Mr. Ochterlony, he gave a great start and said, "God bless us!" under his breath, and was otherwise speech-

less for the moment. He had been thinking of a boy, grown no doubt, but still within the limits of childhood; and lo, it was an unknown human creature that faced him, with a will and thoughts of his own, like its father and mother, and yet like nobody but itself. Hugh, for his part, looked with very curious eyes at the stranger, and dimly recognised him, and grew shamefaced and a little fidgety, as was natural to the boy.

"You see how he has grown," said Mary, who, being the triumphant one among the three, was the first to recover herself. "You do not think him a child now? It is your uncle, Hugh, come to see us. It is very kind of him—but of course you knew who he was."

"I am very glad to see my uncle," said Hugh, with eager shyness. "Yes, I knew. You are like my father's picture, sir;—and your own that we have at the Cottage—and Islay a little. I knew it was you."

And then they all walked on in silence; for Mr. Ochterlony was more moved by this sudden encounter than he cared to acknowledge; and Mary, too, for the moment, being a sympathetic woman, saw her boy with his uncle's eyes, and saw what the recollections were that sprang up at sight of him. She told Hugh to go on and

do his duty, and send home some trout for dinner; and, thus dismissing him, guided her unlooked-for visitor to the Cottage. He knew the way as well as she did, which increased the embarrassment of the situation. Mary saw only the stiles and the fields, and the trees that overtopped the hedges, familiar objects that met her eyes every day; but Francis Ochterlony saw many a past day and past imagination of his own life, and seemed to walk over his own ashes as he went on. And that was Hugh!—Hugh, not his brother, but his nephew and heir, the representative of the Ochterlony's, occupying the position which his own son should have occupied. Mr. Ochterlony had not calculated on the progress of time, and he was startled and even touched, and felt wonderingly—what it is so difficult for a man to feel—that his own course was no longer of much importance to anybody, and that here was his successor. The thought made him giddy, just as Mary's wondering sense of the unreality of her own independent life, and everlastingness of her stay at the Cottage, had made her; but yet in a different way. For perhaps Francis Ochterlony had never actually realized before that most things were over for him, and that his heir stood ready and waiting for the end of his life.

There was still something of this sense of giddiness in his mind when he followed Mary through the open window into the silent drawing-room where nobody was. Perhaps he had not behaved just as he ought to have done to Agatha Seton; and the recollection of a great many things that had happened, and that had not happened, came back upon him as he wound his way with some confusion through the roses. He was half ashamed to go in, like a familiar friend, through the window. Of all men in the world, he had the least right to such a privilege of intimacy. He ought to have gone to the door in a formal way and sent in his card, and been admitted only if Miss Seton pleased; and yet here he was, in the very sanctuary of her life, invited to sit down as it were by her side, led in by the younger generation, which could not but smile at the thought of any sort of sentiment between the old woman and the old man. For indeed Mary, though she was not young, was smiling softly within herself at the idea. She had no sort of sympathy with Mr. Ochterlony's delicate embarrassment, though she was woman enough to hurry away to seek her aunt and prepare her for the meeting, and shield the ancient maiden in the first flutter of her feelings. Thus the master of Earlston was left

alone in the Cottage, with leisure to look round and recognise the identity of the place, and see all its differences, and become aware of its pleasant air of habitation, and all the signs of daily use and wont which had no existence in his own house. All this confused him, and put him at a great disadvantage. The probabilities were that Agatha Seton would not have been a bit the happier had she been mistress of Earlston. Indeed the Cottage had so taken her stamp that it was impossible for anybody, whose acquaintance with her was less than thirty years old, to imagine her with any other surroundings. But Francis Ochterlony had known her for more than thirty years, and naturally he felt that he himself was a possession worth a woman's while, and that he had, so to speak, defrauded her of so important a piece of property; and he was penitent and ashamed of himself. Perhaps too his own heart was moved a little by the sense of something lost. His own house might have borne this sunny air of home; instead of his brother Hugh's son, there might have been a boy of his own to inherit Earlston; and looking back at it quietly in this cottage drawing-room, Francis Ochterlony's life seemed to him something very like a mistake. He was not a hard-hearted man, and the inference he drew from

this conclusion was very much in his nephew's favour. Hugh's boy was almost a man, and there was no doubt that he was the natural heir, and that it was to him everything ought to come. Instead of thinking of marrying, as Aunt Agatha imagined, or founding a hospital, or making any other ridiculous use of his money, his mind, in its softened and compunctious state, turned to its natural and obvious duty. "Let there be no mistake, at least, about the boy," he said to himself. "Let him have all that is good for him, and all that can best fit him for his position;" for, Heaven be praised, there was at least no doubt about Hugh, or question as to his being the lawful and inevitable heir.

It was this process of reasoning, or rather of feeling, that made Mrs. Ochterlony so entirely satisfied with her brother-in-law when she returned (still alone, for Miss Seton was not equal to the exertion all at once, and naturally there was something extra to be ordered for dinner), and began to talk to their uncle about the children.

"There has been no difficulty about Islay," she said; "he always knew what he wanted, and set his heart at once on his profession; but Hugh has no such decided turn. It was very kind what you said when you wrote—but I—

don't think it is good for the boy to be idle. Whatever you might think it right to arrange afterwards, I think he should have something to do——"

"I did not think he had been so old," said Mr. Ochterlony, almost apologetically. "Time does not leave much mark of its progress at Earlston. Something to do? I thought what a young fellow of his age enjoyed most was amusing himself. What would he like to do?"

"He does not know," said Mary, a little abashed; "that is why I wanted so much to consult you. I suppose people have talked to him of—of what you might do for him; but he cannot bear the thought of hanging, as it were, on your charity——"

"Charity!" said Mr. Ochterlony, "it is not charity, it is right and nature. I hope he is not one of those touchy sort of boys that think kindness an injury. My poor brother Hugh was always fidgety——"

"Oh no, it is not that," said the anxious mother, "only he is afraid that you might think he was calculating upon you; as if you were obliged to provide for him——"

"And so I am obliged to provide for him," said Mr. Ochterlony, "as much as I should be

obliged to provide for my own son, if I had one. We must find him something to do. Perhaps I ought to have thought of it sooner. What has been done about his education? What school has he been at? Is he fit for the University? Earlston will be a better property in his days than it was when I was young," added the uncle with a natural sigh. If he had but provided himself with an heir of his own, perhaps it would have been less troublesome on the whole. "I would send him to Oxford, which would be the best way of employing him; but is he fit for it? Where has he been to school?"

Upon which Mary, with some confusion, murmured something about the curate, and felt for the first time as if she had been indifferent to the education of her boy.

"The curate!" said Mr. Ochterlony; and he gave a little shrug of his shoulders, as if that was a very poor security for Hugh's scholarship.

"He has done very well with all his pupils," said Mary, "and Mr. Cramer, to whom Islay is going, was very much satisfied——"

"I forget where Islay was going?" said Mr. Ochterlony, inquiringly.

"Mr. Cramer lives near Kendal," said Mary; "he was very highly recommended; and we

thought the boy could come home for Sunday——"

Mr. Ochterlony shook his head, though still in a patronizing and friendly way. "I am not sure that it is good to choose a tutor because the boy can come home on Sunday," he said, "nor send them to the curate that you may keep them with yourself. I know it is the way with ladies; but it would have been better, I think, to have sent them to school."

Mrs. Ochterlony was confounded by this verdict against her. All at once her eyes seemed to be opened, and she saw herself a selfish mother keeping her boys at her own apron-strings. She had not time to think of such poor arguments in her favour as want of means, or her own perfectly good intentions. She was silent, struck dumb by this unthought-of condemnation; but just then a champion she had not thought of appeared in her defence.

"Mr. Small did very well for Hugh," said a voice at the window; "he is a very good tutor so far as he goes. He did very well for Hugh—and Islay too," said the new-comer, who came in at the window as he spoke with a bundle of books under his arm. The interruption was so unexpected that Mr. Ochterlony, being quite

unused to the easy entrance of strangers at the window, and into the conversation, started up alarmed and a little angry. But, after all, there was nothing to be angry about.

"It is only Will," said Mary. "Wilfrid, it is your uncle, whom you have not seen for so long. This was my baby," she added, turning to her brother-in-law, with an anxious smile—for Wilfrid was a boy who puzzled strangers, and was not by any means so sure to make a good impression as the others were. Mr. Ochterlony shook hands with the new-comer, but he surveyed him a little doubtfully. He was about thirteen, a long boy, with big wrists and ankles visible, and signs of rapid growth. His face did not speak of country air and fare and outdoor life and healthful occupation like his brother's, but was pale and full of fancies and notions which he did not reveal to everybody. He came in and put down his books and threw himself into a chair with none of his elder brother's shamefacedness. Will, for his part, was not given to blushing. He knew nothing of his uncle's visit, but he took it quietly as a thing of course, and prepared to take part in the conversation, whatever its subject might be.

"Mr. Small has done very well for them all," said Mary, taking heart again; "he has

always done very well with his pupils. Mr. Cramer was very much satisfied with the progress Islay had made; and as for Hugh——"

"He is quite clever enough for Hugh," said Will, with the same steady voice.

Mr. Ochterlony, though he was generally so grave, was amused. "My young friend, are you sure you are a judge?" he said. "Perhaps he is not clever enough for Wilfrid—is that what you meant to say?"

"It is not so much the being clever," said the boy. "I think he has taught me as much as he knows, so it is not his fault. I wish we had been sent to school; but Hugh is all right. He knows as much as he wants to know, I suppose; and as for Islay, his is technical," the young critic added with a certain quiet superiority. Will, poor fellow, was the clever one of the family, and somehow he had found it out.

Mr. Ochterlony looked at this new representative of his race with a little alarm. Perhaps he was thinking that, on the whole, it was as well not to have boys; and then, as much from inability to carry on the conversation as from interest in his own particular subject, he returned to Hugh.

"The best plan, perhaps, will be for Hugh to

go back with me to Earlston; that is, if it is not disagreeable to you," he said, in his old-fashioned, polite way. "I have been too long thinking about it, and his position must be made distinct. Oxford would be the best; that would be good for him in every way. And I think afterwards he might pay a little attention to the estate. I never could have believed that babies grew into boys, and boys to men, so quickly. Why, it can barely be a few years since——Ah!" Mr. Ochterlony got up very precipitately from his chair. It was Aunt Agatha who had come into the room, with her white hair smoothed under her white cap, and her pretty Shetland shawl over her shoulders. Then he perceived that it was more than a few years since he had last seen her. The difference was more to him than the difference in the boys, who were creatures that sprang up nobody knew how, and were never to be relied upon. That summer morning when she came to Earlston to claim her niece, Miss Seton had been old; but it was a different kind of age from that which sat upon her soft countenance now. Francis Ochterlony had not for many a year asked himself in his seclusion whether he was old or young. His occupations were all tranquil, and he had not felt himself unable for

them; but if Agatha Seton was like this, surely then it must indeed be time to think of an heir.

The day passed with a curious speed and yet tardiness, such as is peculiar to days of excitement. When they were not talking of the boys, nobody could tell what to talk about. Once or twice, indeed, Mr. Ochterlony began to speak of the Numismatic Society, or the excavations at Nineveh, or some other cognate subject; but he always came to a standstill when he caught Aunt Agatha's soft eyes wondering over him. They had not talked about excavations, nor numismatics either, the last time he had been here; and there was no human link between that time and this, except the boys, of whom they could all talk; and to this theme accordingly everybody returned. Hugh came in audibly, leaving his basket at the kitchen door as he passed, and Islay, with his long head and his deep eyes, came down from his room where he was working, and Will kept his seat in the big Indian chair in the corner, where he dangled his long legs, and listened. Everybody felt the importance of the moment, and was dreadfully serious, even when lighter conversation was attempted. To show the boys in their best light, each of the three, and yet not so to show them

as if anybody calculated upon, or was eager about the uncle's patronage; to give him an idea of their different characters, without any suspicion of "showing off," which the lads could not have tolerated; all this was very difficult to the two anxious women, and required such an amount of mental effort as made it hard to be anything but serious. Fortunately, the boys themselves were a little excited by the novelty of such a visitor, and curious about their uncle, not knowing what his appearance might mean. Hugh flushed into a singular mixture of exaltation, and suspicion, and surprise, when Mr. Ochterlony invited him to Earlston; and looked at his mother with momentary distrust, to see if by any means she had sought the invitation; and Wilfrid sat and dangled his long legs, and listened, with an odd appreciation of the fact that the visit was to Hugh, and not to himself, or any more important member of the family. As for Islay, he was always a good fellow, and like himself; and his way was clear before him, and admitted of no hopes or fears except as to whether or not he should succeed at his examination, which was a matter about which he had himself no very serious doubts, though he said little about it; and perhaps on the whole it was Islay, who was quite indifferent, whom Mr. Ochterlony would have

fixed his choice upon, had he been at liberty to choose.

When the visitor departed, which he did the same evening, the household drew a long breath; everybody was relieved, from Peggy in the kitchen, whose idea was that the man was "looking after our Miss Agatha again," down to Will, who had now leisure and occasion to express his sentiments on the subject. Islay went back to his work, to make up for the lost day, having only a moderate and temporary interest in his uncle. It was the elder and the younger who alone felt themselves concerned. As for Hugh, the world seemed to have altered in these few hours; Mr. Ochterlony had not said a great deal to him; but what he said had been said as a man speaks who means and has the power to carry out his words; and the vague heirship had become all of a sudden the realest fact in existence, and a thing which could not be, and never could have been, otherwise. And he was slightly giddy, and his head swam with the sudden elevation. But as for Wilfrid, what had he to do with it, any more than any other member of the family? though he was always a strange boy, and there never was any reckoning what he might do or say.

CHAPTER VII.

WILL'S room was a small room opening from his mother's, which would have been her dressing-room had she wanted such a luxury; and when Mrs. Ochterlony went up-stairs late that night, after a long talk with Aunt Agatha, she found the light still burning in the little room, and her boy seated, with his jacket and his shoes off, on the floor, in a brown study. He was sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin in a patch of moonlight that shone in from the window. The moonlight made him look ghastly, and his candle had burnt down, and was flickering unsteadily in the socket, and Mary was alarmed. She did not think of any moral cause for the first moment, but only that something was the matter with him, and went in with a sudden maternal panic to see what it was. Will took no immediate notice of her anxious ques-

tions, but he condescended to raise his head and prop up his chin with his hands, and stare up into her face.

"Mother," he said, "you always go on as if a fellow was ill. Can't one be thinking a little without anything being the matter? I should have put out my light had I known you were coming up-stairs.

"You know, Will, that I cannot have you sit here and think, as you say. It is not thinking —it is brooding, and does you harm," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "Jump up, and go to bed."

"Presently," said the boy. "Is it true that Hugh will go to Oxford, mamma?"

"Very likely," said Mary, with some pride. "Your uncle will see how he has got on with his studies, and after that I think he will go."

"What for?" said Will. "What is the good? He knows as much as he wants to know, and Mr. Small is quite good enough for him."

"What for?" said Mary, with displeasure. "For his education, like other gentlemen, and that he may take his right position. But you are too young to understand all that. Get up, and go to bed."

"I am not too young to understand," said Wilfrid; "what is the good of throwing money and time away? You may tell my uncle, Hugh

will never do any good at Oxford; and I don't see, for my part, why he should be the one to go."

"He is the eldest son, and he is your uncle's heir," said Mary, with a conscious swelling of her motherly heart.

"I don't see what difference being the eldest makes," said Will, embracing his knees. "I have been thinking over it this long time. Why should he be sent to Oxford, and the rest of us stay at home? What does it matter about the eldest? A fellow is not any better than me because he was born before me. You might as well send Peggy to Oxford," said Will, with vehemence, "as send Hugh."

Mrs. Ochterlony, whose mind just then was specially occupied by Hugh, was naturally disturbed by this speech. She put out the flickering candle, and set down her own light, and closed the door. "I cannot let you speak so about your brother, Will," she said. "He may not be so quick as you are for your age, but I wish you were as modest and as kind as Hugh is. Why should you grudge his advancement? I used to think you would get the better of this feeling when you ceased to be a child."

"Of what feeling?" cried Will, lifting his pale face from his knees.

"My dear boy, you ought to know," said Mary; "this grudge that any one should have a pleasure or an advantage which you have not. A child may be excused, but no man who thinks so continually of himself——"

"I was not thinking of myself," said Will, springing up from the floor with a flush on his face. "You will always make a moral affair of it, mother. As if one could not discuss a thing. But I know that Hugh is not clever, though he is the eldest. Let him have Earlston if he likes, but why should he have Oxford? And why should it always be supposed that he is better, and a different kind of clay?"

"I wonder where you learned all that, Will," said Mary, with a smile. "One would think you had picked up some Radical or other. I might be vexed to see Lady Balderston walk out of the room before me, if it was because she pretended to be a better woman; but when it is only because she is Lady Balderston, what does it matter? Hugh can't help being the eldest; if you had been the eldest——"

"Ah!" said Will, with a long breath; "if I had been the eldest——" And then he stopped short.

"What would you have done?" said Mrs. Ochterlony, smiling still.

"I would have done what Hugh will never do," cried the boy. "I would have taken care of everybody. I would have found out what they were fit for, and put them in the right way. The one that had brains should have been cultivated, and the one who had no brains should have—done something else. There should have been no such mistake as—— But that is always how it is in the world—everybody says so," said Wilfrid; "stupid people who know nothing about it are set at the head, and those who could manage——"

"Will," said his mother, "do you know you are very presumptuous, and think a great deal too well of yourself? If you were not such a child, I should be angry. It is very well to be clever at your lessons, but that is no proof that you are able to manage, as you say. Let Hugh and his prospects alone for to-night, and go to bed."

"Yes, I can let him alone," said Will. "I suppose it is not worth one's while to mind—he will do no good at Oxford, you know, that is one thing;—whereas other people——"

"Always yourself, Will," said Mary, with a sigh.

"Myself—or even Islay," said the boy, in the most composed way; "though Islay is very technical. Still, he could do some good. But Hugh

is an out-of-door sort of fellow. He would do for a farmer or gamekeeper, or to go to Australia, as he says. A man should always follow his natural bent. If, instead of going by eldest sons and that sort of rubbish, they were to try for the right man in the right place. And then you might be sure to be done the best for, mother, and that he would take care of *you.*"

"Will, you are very conceited and very unjust," said Mary; but she was his mother, and she relented as she looked into his weary young face: "but I hope you have your heart in the right place, for all your talk," she said, kissing him before she went away. She went back to her room disturbed, as she had often been before, but still smiling at Will's "way." It was all boyish folly and talk, and he did not mean it; and as he grew older he would learn better. Mary did not care to speculate upon the volcanic elements which, for anything she could tell, might be lying under her very hand. She could not think of different developments of character, and hostile individualities, as people might to whom the three boys were but boys in the abstract, and not Hugh, Islay, and Will—the one as near and dear to her as the other. Mrs. Ochterlony was not philosophical, neither could she follow out to their natural results the tenden-

cies which she could not but see. She preferred to think of it, as Will himself said, as a moral affair—a fault which would mend; and so laid her head on her pillow with a heart uneasy—but no more uneasy than was consistent with the full awakening of anxious yet hopeful life.

As for Will, he was asleep ten minutes after, and had forgotten all about it. His heart *was* in its right place, though he was plagued with a very arrogant, troublesome, restless little head, and a greater amount of "notions" than are good for his age. He wanted to be at the helm of affairs, to direct everything—a task for which he felt himself singularly competent; but, after all, it was for the benefit of other people that he wanted to rule. It seemed to him that he could arrange for everybody so much better than they could for themselves; and he would have been liberal to Hugh, though he had a certain contempt for his abilities. He would have given him occupation suited to him, and all the indulgences which he was most fitted to appreciate: and he would have made a kind of beneficent empress of his mother, and put her at the head of all manner of benevolences, as other wise despots have been known to do. But Will was the youngest, and nobody so much as asked his advice, or took him into consideration; and the

poor boy was thus thrown back upon his own superiority, and got to brood upon it, and scorn the weaker expedients with which other people sought to fill up the place which he alone was truly qualified to fill. Fortunately, however, he forgot all this as soon as he had fallen asleep.

Hugh had no such legislative views for his part. He was not given to speculation. He meant to do his duty, and be a credit to everybody belonging to him; but he was a great deal "younger" than his boy-brother, and it did not occur to him to separate himself in idea—even to do them good—from his own people. The future danced and glimmered before him, but it was a brightness without any theory in it—a thing full of spontaneous good-fortune and well-doing, with which his own cleverness had nothing to do. Islay, for his part, thought very little about it. He was pleased for Hugh's sake, but as he had always looked upon Hugh's good fortune as a certainty, the fact did not excite him, and he was more interested about a tough problem he was working at, and which his uncle's visit had interrupted. It was a more agitated household than it had been a few months before—ere the doors of the future had opened suddenly upon the lads; but there was still no agitation under

the Cottage roof which was inconsistent with sweet rest and quiet sleep.

It made a dreadful difference in the house, as everybody said, when the two boys went away—Islay to Mr. Cramer's, the "coach" who was to prepare him for his examination, and Hugh to Earlston. The Cottage had always been quiet, its inhabitants thought, but now it fell into a dead calm, which was stifling and unearthly. Will, the only representative of youth left among them, was graver than Aunt Agatha, and made no gay din, but only noises of an irritating kind. He kicked his legs and feet about, and the legs of all the chairs, and let his books fall, and knocked over the flower-stands—which were all exasperating sounds; but he did not fill the house with snatches of song, with laughter, and the pleasant evidence that a light heart was there. He used to "read" in his own room, with a diligence which was much stimulated by the conviction that Mr. Small was very little ahead of him, and, to keep up his position of instructor, must work hard, too; and, when this was over, he planted himself in a corner of the drawing-room, in the great Indian chair, with a book, beguiling the two ladies into unconsciousness of his presence, and then interposing in their conversation in the most inconvenient way.

This was Will's way of showing his appreciation of his mother's society. He was not her right hand, like Hugh, nor did he watch over her comfort in Islay's steady, noiseless way. But he liked to be in the same room with her, to haunt the places where she was, to interfere in what she was doing, and seize the most unfit moments for the expression of his sentiments. With Aunt Agatha he was abrupt and indifferent, being insensible to all conventional delicacies; and he took pleasure, or seemed to take pleasure, in contradicting Mrs. Ochterlony, and going against all her conclusions and arguments; but he paid her the practical compliment of preferring her society, and keeping by her side.

It was while thus left alone, and with the excitement of this first change fresh upon her, that Mrs. Ochterlony heard another piece of news which moved her greatly. It was that the regiment at Carlisle was about to leave, and that it was *Our* regiment which was to take its place. She thought she was sorry for the first moment. It was upon one of those quiet afternoons, just after the boys had left the Cottage, when the two ladies were sitting in the silence, not talking much, thinking how long it was to post-time, and how strange it was that the welcome steps and voices which used to invade the quiet so abruptly

and so sweetly, were now beyond hoping for. And the afternoon seemed to have grown so much longer, now that there was no Hugh to burst in with news from the outer world, no Islay to emerge from his problem. Will sat, as usual, in the great chair, but he was reading, and did not contribute to the cheerfulness of the party. And it was just then that Sir Edward came in, doubly welcome, to talk of the absent lads, and ask for the last intelligence of them, and bring this startling piece of news. Mrs. Ochterlony was aware that the regiment had finished its service in India long ago, and there was, of course, no reason why it should not come to Carlisle, but it was not an idea which had ever occurred to her. She thought she was sorry for the first moment, and the news gave her an unquestionable shock; but, after all, it was not a shock of pain; her heart gave a leap, and kept on beating faster, as with a new stimulus. She could think of nothing else all the evening. Even when the post came, and the letters, and all the wonderful first impressions of the two new beginners in the world, this other thought returned as soon as it was possible for any thought to regain a footing. She began to feel as if the very sight of the uniform would be worth a pilgrimage; and then there would be so

many questions to ask, so many curiosities and yearnings to satisfy. She could not keep her mind from going out into endless speculations—how many would remain of her old friends?—how many might have dropped out of the ranks, or exchanged, or retired, or been promoted?—how many new marriages there had been, and how many children?—little Emma Askell, for instance, how many babies she might have now? Mary had kept up a desultory correspondence with some of the ladies for a year or two, and even had continued for a long time to get serious letters from Mrs. Kirkman; but these correspondences had dropped off gradually, as is their nature, and the colonel's wife was not a woman to enlarge on Emma Askell's babies, having matters much more important on hand.

This new opening of interest moved Mrs. Ochterlony in spite of herself. She forgot all the painful associations, and looked forward to the arrival of the regiment as an old sailor might look for the arrival of a squadron on active service. Did the winds blow and the waves rise as they used to do on those high seas from which they came? Though Mary had been so long becalmed, she remembered all about the conflicts and storms of that existence more vividly than she remembered what had passed yesterday, and

she had a strange longing to know whether all that had departed from her own life existed still for her old friends. Between the breaks of the tranquil conversation she felt herself continually relapse into the regimental roll, always beginning again and always losing the thread; recalling the names of the men and of their wives whom she had been kind to once, and feeling as if they belonged to her, and as if something must be brought back to her by their return.

There was, however, little said about it all that evening, much as it was in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind. When the letters had been discussed, the conversation languished. Summer had begun to wane, and the roses were over, and it began to be impracticable to keep the windows open all the long evening. There was even a fire for the sake of cheerfulness—a little fire which blazed and crackled and made twice as much display as if it had been a serious winter fire and essential to existence—and all the curtains were drawn except over the one window from which Sir Edward's light was visible. Aunt Agatha had grown more fanciful than ever about that window since Winnie's marriage. Even in winter the shutters were never closed there until Miss Seton herself went upstairs, and all the long night the friendly star of Sir

Edward's lamp shone faint but steady in the distance. In this way the hall and the cottage kept each other kindly company, and the thought pleased the old people, who had been friends all their lives. Aunt Agatha sat by her favourite table, with her own lamp burning softly and responding to Sir Edward's far-off light, and she never raised her head without seeing it and thinking thoughts in which Sir Edward had but a small share. It was darker than usual on this special night, and there were neither moon nor stars to diminish the importance of the domestic Pharos. Miss Seton looked up, and her eyes lingered upon the blackness of the window and the distant point of illumination, and she sighed as she often did. It was a long time ago, and the boys had grown up in the meantime, and intruded much upon Aunt Agatha's affections; but still these interlopers had not made her forget the especial child of her love.

"My poor dear Winnie!" said the old lady. "I sometimes almost fancy I can see her coming in by that window. She was fond of seeing Sir Edward's light. Now that the dear boys are gone, and it is so quiet again, does it not make you think sometimes of your darling sister, Mary? If we could only hear as often from her as we hear from Islay and Hugh——"

"But it is not long since you had a letter," said Mary, who, to tell the truth, had not been thinking much of her darling sister, and felt guilty when this appeal was made to her.

"Yes," said Aunt Agatha, with a sigh, "and they are always such nice letters; but I am afraid I am very discontented, my dear love. I always want to have something more. I was thinking some of your friends in the regiment could tell you, perhaps, about Edward. I never would say it to you, for I knew that you had things of your own to think about; but for a long time I have been very uneasy in my mind."

"But Winnie has not complained," said Mary, looking up unconsciously at Sir Edward's window, and feeling as if it shone with a certain weird and conscious light, like a living creature aware of all that was being said.

"She is not a girl ever to complain," said Aunt Agatha, proudly. "She is more like what I would have been myself, Mary, if I had ever been—in the circumstances, you know. She would break her heart before she would complain. I think there is a good deal of difference, my dear, between your nature and ours; and that was, perhaps, why you never quite understood my sweet Winnie. I am sure you are

more reasonable; but you are not—not to call passionate, you know. It is a great deal better, a very great deal better," cried Aunt Agatha, anxiously. "You must not think I do not see that; but Winnie and I are a couple of fools that would do anything for love; and, rather than complain, I am sure she would die."

Mary did not say that Winnie had done what was a great deal more than complaining, and had set her husband before them in a very uncomfortable light—and she took the verdict upon herself quietly, as a matter of course. "Mr. Askell used to know him very well," she said; "perhaps he knows something. But Edward Percival never was very popular, and you must not quarrel with me if I bring you back a disagreeable report. I think I will go into Carlisle as soon as they arrive—I should like to see them all again."

"I should like to hear the truth whatever it is," said Aunt Agatha, "but my dear love, seeing them all will be a great trial for you."

Mary was silent, for she was thinking of other things: not merely of her happy days, and the difference which would make such a meeting "a great trial;" but of the one great vexation and mortification of her life, of which the regiment was aware—and whether the painful

memory of it would ever return again to vex her. It had faded out of her recollection in the long peacefulness and quiet of her life. Could it ever return again to shame and wound, as it had once done? From where she was sitting with her work, between the cheerful lamp and the bright little blazing fire, Mary went away in an instant to the scene so distant and different, and was kneeling again by her husband's side, a woman humbled, yet never before so indignantly, resentfully proud, in the little chapel of the station. Would it ever come back again, that one blot on her life, with all its false, injurious suggestions? She said to herself "No." No doubt it had died out of other people's minds as out of her own, and on Kirtell-side nobody would have dared to doubt on such a subject; and now that the family affairs were settled, and Hugh was established at Earlston, his uncle's acknowledged heir, this cloud, at least, could never rise on her again to take the comfort out of her life. She dismissed the very thought of it from her mind, and her heart warmed to the recollection of the old faces and the old ways. She had a kind of a longing to see them, as if her life would be completer after. It was not as "a great trial" that Mary thought of it.

She was too eager and curious to know how they had all fared; and if, to some of them at least, the old existence, so long broken up for herself, continued and flourished as of old.

CHAPTER VIII.

IT was accordingly with a little excitement that when the regiment had actually arrived Mrs. Ochterlony set out for the neighbouring town to renew her acquaintance with her old friends. It was winter by that time, and winter is seldom very gentle in Cumberland; but she was too much interested to be detained by the weather. She had said nothing to Wilfrid on the subject, and it startled her a little to find him standing at the door waiting for her, carefully dressed, which was not usually a faculty of his, and evidently prepared to accompany her. When she opened the Cottage door to go out, and saw him, an unaccountable panic seized her. There he stood in the sunshine,—not gay and thoughtless like his brother Hugh, nor preoccupied like Islay,—with his keen eyes and sharp ears, and mind that seemed always to lie in wait for some-

thing. The recollection of the one thing which she did not want to be known had come strongly to her mind once more at that particular moment; a little tremor had run through her frame—a sense of half-painful, half-pleasant excitement. When her eye fell on Wilfrid, she went back a step unconsciously, and her heart for the moment seemed to stop beating. She wanted to bring her friends to Kirtell, to show them her boys and make them acquainted with all her life; and probably, had it been Hugh, he would have accompanied her as a matter of course. But somehow Wilfrid was different. Without knowing what her reason was, she felt reluctant to undergo the first questionings and reminiscences with this keen spectator standing by to hear and see all, and to demand explanation of matters which it might be difficult to explain.

"Did you mean to go with me, Will?" she said. "But you know we cannot leave Aunt Agatha all by herself. I wanted to see you to ask you to be as agreeable as possible while I am gone."

"I am never agreeable to Aunt Agatha," said Will; "she always liked the others best; and besides, she does not want me, and I am going to take care of you."

"Thank you," said Mary, with a smile; "but I don't want you either for to-day. We shall have so many things to talk about—old affairs that you would not understand."

"I like that sort of thing," said Will; "I like listening to women's talk—especially when it is about things I don't understand. It is always something new."

Mary smiled, but there was something in his persistence that frightened her. "My dear Will, I don't want you to-day," she said with a slight shiver, in spite of herself.

"Why, mamma?" said Will, with open eyes.

He was not so well brought up as he ought to have been, as everybody will perceive. He did not accept his mother's decision, and put away his Sunday hat, and say no more about it. On the contrary, he looked with suspicion (as she thought) at her, and kept his position—surprised and remonstrative, and not disposed to give in.

"Will," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "I will not have you with me, and that must be enough. These are all people whom I have not seen since you were a baby. It may be a trial for us all to meet, for I don't know what may have happened to them. I can speak of my affairs before you, for you—know them all," Mary went on with a

momentary faltering; "but it is not to be supposed that they could speak of theirs in the presence of a boy they do not know. Go now and amuse yourself, and don't do anything to frighten Aunt Agatha; and you can come and meet me by the evening train."

But she could not get rid of a sense of fear as she left him. He was not like other boys, from whose mind a little contradiction passes away almost as soon as it is spoken. He had that strange faculty of connecting one thing with another, which is sometimes so valuable, and sometimes leads a lively intellect so much astray; and if ever he should come to know that there was anything in his mother's history which she wished to keep concealed from him——. It was a foolish thought, but it was not the less painful on that account. Mary had come to the end of her little journey before she got free from its influence. The united household at the cottage was not rich enough to possess anything in the shape of a carriage, but they were near the railway, which served almost the same purpose. It seemed to Mrs. Ochterlony as if the twelve intervening years were but a dream when she found herself in a drawing-room which had already taken Mrs. Kirkman's imprint, and breathed of her in every corner. It was not

such a room, it is true, as the hot Indian chamber in which Mary had last seen the colonel's wife. It was one of the most respectable and sombre, as well as one of the best of the houses which let themselves furnished, with an eye to the officers. It had red curtains and red carpets, and blinds drawn more than half way down; and there were two or three boxes, with a significant slit in the lid, distributed about the different tables. In the centre of the round table before the fire there was a little trophy built up of small Indian gods, which were no doubt English manufacture, but which had been for a long time Mrs. Kirkman's text, and quite invaluable to her as a proof of the heathen darkness, which was her favourite subject; and at the foot of this ugly pyramid lay a little heap of pamphlets, reports of all the societies under heaven. Mary recognised, too, as she sat and waited, the large brown-paper cover, in which she knew by experience Mrs. Kirkman's favourite tracts were enclosed; and the little basket which contained a smaller roll, and which had room besides occasionally for a little tea and sugar, when circumstances made them necessary; and the book with limp boards, in which the Colonel's wife kept her list of names, with little biographical comments opposite, which had once

amused the subalterns so much when it fell into their hands. She had her sealed book besides, with a Bramah lock, which was far too sacred to be revealed to profane eyes; but yet, perhaps, she liked to tantalize profane eyes with the sight of its undiscoverable riches, for it lay on the table like the rest. This was how Mary saw at a glance that, whatever might have happened to the others, Mrs. Kirkman at least was quite unchanged.

She came gliding into the room a minute after, so like herself that Mrs. Ochterlony felt once more that time was not, and that her life had been a dream. She folded her visitor in a silent embrace, and kissed her with inexpressible meaning, and fanned her cheeks with those two long locks hanging out of curl, which had been her characteristic embellishments since ever any one remembered. The light hair was now a little grey, but that made no difference to speak of either in colour or general aspect; and, so far as any other change went, those intervening years might never have been.

"My dear Mary!" she said at last. "My dear friend! Oh, what a thought that little as we deserve it, we should have been *both* spared to meet again!"

There was an emphasis on the *both* which it

was very touching to hear; and Mary naturally could not but feel that the wonder and the thankfulness were chiefly on her own account.

"I am very glad to see you again," she said, feeling her heart yearn to her old friend—"and so entirely unchanged."

"Oh, I hope not," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I hope we have *both* profited by our opportunities, and made some return for so many mercies. One great thing I have looked forward to ever since I knew we were coming here, was the thought of seeing you again. You know I always considered you one of my own little flock, dear Mary! one of those who would be my crown of rejoicing. It is such a pleasure to have you again."

And Mrs. Kirkman gave Mrs. Ochterlony another kiss, and thought of the woman that was a sinner with a gush of sweet feeling in her heart.

As for Mary, she took it very quietly, having no inclination to be affronted or offended—but, on the contrary, a kind of satisfaction in finding all as it used to be; the same thoughts and the same kind of talk, and everything unchanged, while all with herself had changed so much. "Thank you," she said; "and now tell me about yourself and about them all; the Hes-

keths and the Churchills, and all our old friends. I am thirsting to hear about them, and what changes there may have been, and how many are here."

"Ah, my dear Mary, there have been many changes," said Mrs. Kirkman. "Mrs. Churchill died years ago—did you not hear?—and in a very much more prepared state of mind, I trust and hope; and he has a curacy somewhere, and is bringing up the poor children—in his own pernicious views, I sadly fear."

"Has he pernicious views?" said Mary. "Poor Mrs. Churchill—and yet one could not have looked for anything else."

"Don't say poor," said Mrs. Kirkman. "It is good for her to have been taken away from the evil to come. He is very lax, and always was very lax. You know how little he was to be depended upon at the station, and how much was thrown upon me, unworthy as I am, to do; and it is sad to think of those poor dear children brought up in such opinions. They are very poor, but that is nothing in comparison. Captain Hesketh retired when we came back to England. They went to their own place in the country, and they are very comfortable, I believe —too comfortable, Mary. It makes them forget things that are so much more precious.

And I doubt if there is anybody to say a faithful word——"

"She was very kind," said Mary, "and good to everybody. I am very sorry they are gone."

"Yes, she was kind," said Mrs. Kirkman, "that kind of natural amiability which is such a delusion. And everything goes well with them," she added, with a sigh: "there is nothing to rouse them up. Oh, Mary, you remember what I said when your pride was brought low—anything is better than being let alone."

Mrs. Ochterlony began to feel her old opposition stirring in her mind, but she refrained heroically, and went on with her interrogatory. "And the doctor," she said, "and the Askells? —they are still in the regiment. I want you to tell me where I can find Emma, and how things have gone with her—poor child! but she ought not to be such a baby now."

Mrs. Kirkman sighed. "No, she ought not to be a baby," she said. "I never like to judge any one, and I would like you to form your own opinion, Mary. She too has little immortal souls committed to her; and oh! it is sad to see how little people think of such a trust —whereas others who would have given their whole souls to it—— But no doubt it is all

for the best. I have not asked you yet how are your dear boys? I hope you are endeavouring to make them grow in grace. Oh, Mary, I hope you have thought well over your responsibility. A mother has so much in her hands."

"Yes," said Mrs. Ochterlony, quickly; "but they are very good boys, and I have every reason to be content with them. Hugh is at Earlston, just now, with his uncle. He is to succeed him, you know; and he is going to Oxford directly, I believe. And Islay is going to Woolwich if he can pass his examination. He is just the same long-headed boy he used to be. And Will—my baby; perhaps you remember what a little thing he was?—I think he is going to be the genius of the family." Mary went on with a simple effusiveness unusual to her, betrayed by the delight of talking about her boys to some one who knew and yet did not know them. Perhaps she forgot that her listener's interest could not possibly be so great as her own.

Mrs. Kirkman sat with her hands clasped on her knee, and she looked in Mary's eyes with a glance which was meant to go to her soul—a mournful inquiring glance which, from under the dropped eyelids, seemed to fall as from an altitude of scarcely human compassion and solicitude. "Oh, call them not good," she said.

"Tell me what signs of awakening you have seen in their hearts. Dear Mary, do not neglect the one thing needful for your precious boys. Think of their immortal souls. That is what interests me much more than their worldly prospects. Do you think their hearts have been truly touched——"

"I think God has been very kind to us all, and that they are good boys," said Mary; "you know we don't think quite alike on some subjects; or, at least, we don't express ourselves alike. I can see you do as much as ever among the men, and among the poor——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Kirkman, with a sigh; "I feel unworthy of it, and the flesh is weak, and I would fain draw back; but it happens strangely that there is always a very lukewarm ministry wherever we are placed, my dear. I would give anything in the world to be but a hearer of the word like others; but yet woe is unto me if I neglect the work. This is some one coming in now to speak with me on spiritual matters. I am at home to them between two and three; but, my dear Mary, it is not necessary that you, who have been in the position of an inquiring soul yourself, should go away."

"I will come back again," said Mary, rising; "and you will come to see me at Kirtell, will

not you? It makes one forget how many years have passed to see you employed exactly as of old."

"Ah, we are all too apt to forget how the years pass," said Mrs. Kirkman. She gave a nod of recognition to some women who came shyly in at the moment, and then she took Mary's hand and drew her a step aside. "And nothing more has happened, Mary?" she said; "nothing has followed? and there is to be no inquiry or anything? I am very thankful, for your sake."

"Inquiry!" said Mary, with momentary amazement. "What kind of inquiry? what could have followed? I do not know what you mean!"

"I mean about—what gave us all so much pain—your marriage, Mary," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I hope there has been nothing about it again?"

This was a very sharp trial for the superstition of old friendship in Mrs. Ochterlony's heart, especially as the inquiring souls who had come to see Mrs. Kirkman were within hearing, and looked with a certain subdued curiosity upon the visitor and the conversation. Mary's face flushed with a sudden burning, and indignation came to her aid; but even at that moment her

strongest feeling was thankfulness that Wilfrid was not there.

"I do not know what could have been about it," she said: "I am among my own people here; my marriage was well known, and everything about it, in my own place."

"You are angry, dear," said Mrs. Kirkman. "Oh, don't encourage angry feelings; you know I never made any difference; I never imagined it was your fault. And I am so glad to hear it has made no unpleasantness with the dear boys."

Perhaps it was not with the same charity as at first that Mrs. Ochterlony felt the long curls again fan her cheek, but still she accepted the farewell kiss. She had expected some ideal difference, some visionary kind of elevation, which would leave the same individual, yet a loftier kind of woman, in the place of her former friend. And what she had found was a person quite unchanged—the same woman, harder in her peculiarities rather than softer, as is unfortunately the most usual case. The Colonel's wife had the best meaning in the world, and she was a good woman in her way; but not a dozen lives, let alone a dozen years, could have given her the finer sense which must come by nature, nor even that tolerance and sweetness of ex-

perience, which is a benefit which only a few people in the world draw from the passage of years. Mary was disappointed, but she acknowledged in her heart—having herself acquired that gentleness of experience—that she had no right to be disappointed; and it was with a kind of smile at her own vain expectations that she went in search of Emma Askell, her little friend of old—the impulsive girl, who had amused her, and loved her, and worried her in former times. Young Askell was Captain now, and better off, it was to be hoped: but yet they were not well enough off to be in a handsome house, or have everything proper about them, like the Colonel's wife. It was in the outskirts of the town that Mary had to seek them, in a house with a little bare garden in front, bare in its winter nakedness, with its little grass-plot trodden down by many feet, and showing all those marks of neglect and indifference which betray the stage at which poverty sinks into a muddle of discouragement and carelessness, and forgets appearances. It was a dirty little maid who opened the door, and the house was another very inferior specimen of the furnished house so well known to all unsettled and wandering people. The chances are, that delicate and orderly as Mrs. Ochterlony was by nature, the sombre

shabbiness of the place would not have struck her in her younger days, when she, too, had to take her chance of furnished houses, and do her best, as became a soldier's wife. And then poor little Emma had been married too early, and began her struggling, shifty life too soon, to know anything about that delicate domestic order, which is half a religion. Poor little Emma! she was as old now as Mary had been when she came back to Kirtell with her boys, and it was difficult to form any imagination of what time might have done for her. Mrs. Ochterlony went up the narrow stairs with a sense of half-amused curiosity, guided not only by the dirty little maid, but by the sound of a little voice crying in a lamentable, endless sort of way. It was a kind of cry which in itself told the story of the family—not violent, as if the result of a sudden injury or fit of passion, which there was somebody by to console or to punish, but the endless, tedious lamentation, which nobody took any particular notice of, or cared about.

And this was the scene that met Mrs. Ochterlony's eyes when she entered the room. She had sent the maid away and opened the door herself, for her heart was full. It was a shabby little room on the first floor, with cold windows

opening down to the floor, and letting in the cold Cumberland winds to chill the feet and aggravate the temper of the inhabitants. In the foreground sat a little girl with a baby sleeping on her knee, one little brother in front of her and another behind her chair, and that pretty air of being herself the domestic centre and chief mover of everything, which it is at once sweet and sad to see in a child. This little woman neither saw nor heard the stranger at the door. She had been hushing and rocking her baby, and, now that it had peaceably sunk to sleep, was about to hear her little brother's lesson, as it appeared; while at the same time addressing a word of remonstrance to the author of the cry, another small creature who sat rubbing her eyes with two fat fists, upon the floor. Of all this group, the only one aware of Mary's appearance was the little fellow behind his sister's chair, who lifted wondering eyes to the door, and stared and said nothing, after the manner of children. The little party was so complete in itself, and seemed to centre so naturally in the elder sister, that the spectator felt no need to seek further. It was all new and unlooked for, yet it was a kind of scene to go to the heart of a woman who had children of her own; and Mary stood and looked at the

little ones, and at the child-mother in the midst of them, without even becoming aware of the presence of the actual mother, who had been lying on a sofa, in a detached and separate way, reading a book, which she now thrust under her pillow, as she raised herself on her cushions and gazed with wide-open eyes at her visitor, who did not see her. It was a woman very little like the pretty Emma of old times, with a hectic colour on her cheeks, her hair hanging loosely and disordered by lying down, and the absorbed, half-awakened look, natural to a mind which has been suddenly roused up out of a novel into an actual emergency. The hushing of the baby to sleep, the hearing of the lessons, the tedious crying of the little girl at her feet, had all gone on without disturbing Mrs. Askell. She had been so entirely absorbed in one of Jane Eyre's successors and imitators (for that was the epoch of Jane Eyre in novels), and Nelly was so completely responsible for all that was going on, that the mother had never even roused up to a sense of what was passing round her, until the door opened and the stranger looked in with a face which was not a stranger's face.

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Askell, springing up. "Oh, my Madonna, can it be you?

Are you sure it is you, you dear, you darling! Don't go looking at the children as if they were the principal, but give me a kiss and say it is you,—say you are sure it is you!"

And the rapture of delight and welcome she went into, though it showed how weak-minded and excitable she was, was in its way not disagreeable to Mary, and touched her heart. She gave the kiss she was asked for, and received a flood in return, and such embraces as nearly took her breath away; and then Nelly was summoned to take "the things" off an easy chair, the only one in the room, which stood near her mother's sofa. Mary was still in Mrs. Askell's embrace when this command was given, but she saw the girl gather up the baby in her arms, and moving softly not to disturb the little sleeper, collect the encumbering articles together and draw the chair forward. No one else moved or took any trouble. The bigger boy stood and watched behind his sister's chair, and the younger one turned round to indulge in the same inspection, and little Emma took her fists out of her eyes. But there was nobody but the little woman with the baby who could get for the guest the only comfortable chair.

"Now sit down and be comfortable, and let me

look at you; I could be content just to look at you all day," said Emma. "You are just as you always were, and not a bit changed. It is because you have not had all our cares. I look a perfect fright, and as old as my grandmother, and I am no good for anything; but you are just the same as you used to be. Oh, it is just like the old times, seeing you! I have been in such a state, I did not know what to do with myself since ever I knew we were coming here."

"But I do not think you are looking old, though you look delicate," said Mary. "Let me make acquaintance with the children. Nelly, you used to be in my arms as much as your mamma's when you were a baby. You are just the same age as my Will, and you were the best baby that ever was. Tell me their names and how old they all are. You know they are all strangers to me."

"Yes," said their mother, with a little fretfulness. "It was such a mercy Nelly was the eldest. I never could have kept living if she had been a boy. I have been such a suffering creature, and we have been moved about so much, and oh, we have had so much to do! You can't fancy what a life we have had," cried

poor Emma; and the mere thought of it brought tears to her eyes.

"Yes, I know it is a troublesome life," said Mary; "but you are young, and you have your husband, and the children are all so well——"

"Yes, the children are all well," said Emma; "but then every new place they come to, they take measles or something, and I am gone to a shadow before they are right again; and then the doctors' bills—I think Charley and Lucy and Emma have had *everything*," said the aggrieved mother; "and they always take them so badly; and then Askell takes it into his head it is damp linen or something, and thinks it is my fault. It is bad enough when a woman is having her children," cried poor Emma, "without all their illnesses, you know, and tempers and bills, and everything besides. Oh, Madonna! you are so well off. You live quiet, and you know nothing about all our cares."

"I think I would not mind the cares," said Mary; "if you were quiet like me, you would not like it. You must come out to Kirtell for a little change."

"Oh, yes, with all my heart," said Emma.

"I think sometimes it would do me all the good in the world just to be out of the noise for a little, and where there was nothing to be found fault with. I should feel like a girl again, my Madonna, if I could be with you."

"And Nelly must come too," said Mrs. Ochterlony, looking down upon the little bright, anxious, careful face.

Nelly was thirteen—the same age as Wilfrid; but she was little, and laden with the care of which her mother talked. Her eyes were hazel eyes, such as would have run over with gladness had they been left to nature, and her brown hair curled a little on her neck. She was uncared for, badly dressed, and not old enough yet for the instinct that makes the budding woman mindful of herself. But the care that made Emma's cheek hollow and her life a waste, looked sweet out of Nelly's eyes. The mother thought she bore it all, and cried and complained under it, while the child took it on her shoulders unawares and carried it without any complaint. Her soft little face lighted up for a moment as Mary spoke, and then her look turned on the sleeping baby with that air half infantile, half motherly, which makes a child's face like an angel's.

"I do not think I could go," she said; "for

the children are not used to the new nurse; and it would make poor papa so uncomfortable; and then it would do mamma so much more good to be quiet for a little without the children——"

Mary rose up softly just then, and, to Nelly's great surprise, bent over her and kissed her. Nobody but such another woman could have told what a sense of envy and yearning was in Mary's heart as she did it. How she would have surrounded with tenderness and love that little daughter who was but a domestic slave to Emma Askell! and yet, if she had been Mary's daughter, and surrounded by love and tenderness, she would not have been such a child. The little thing brightened and blushed, and looked up with a gleam of sweet surprise in her eyes. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. Ochterlony," she said, in that sudden flush of pleasure; and the two recognised each other in that moment, and knitted between them, different as their ages were, that bond of everlasting friendship which is made oftener at sight than in any more cautious way.

"Come and sit by me," said Emma, "or I shall be jealous of my own child. She is a dear little thing, and so good with the others. Come and tell me about your boys. And, oh, please, just one word—we have so often spoken about

it, and so often wondered. Tell me, dear Mrs. Ochterlony, did it never do any harm?"

"Did what never do any harm?" asked Mary, with once more a sudden pang of thankfulness that Wilfrid was not there.

Mrs. Askell threw her arms round Mary's neck and kissed her and clasped her close. "There never was any one like you," she said; "you never even would complain."

This second assault made Mary falter and recoil, in spite of herself. They had not forgot, though she might have forgotten. And, what was even worse than words, as Emma spoke, the serious little woman-child, who had won Mrs. Ochterlony's heart, raised her sweet eyes and looked with a mixture of wonder and understanding in Mary's face. The child whom she would have liked to carry away and make her own—did she, too, know and wonder? There was a great deal of conversation after this—a great deal about the Askells themselves, and a great deal about Winnie and her husband, whom Mrs. Askell knew much more about than Mrs. Ochterlony did. But it would be vain to say that anything she heard made as great an impression upon Mary as the personal allusions which sent the blood tingling through her veins. She went home, at last, with that most grateful sense of

home which can only be fully realised by those who return from the encounter of an indifferent world, and from friends who, though kind, are naturally disposed to regard everything from their own point of view. It is sweet to have friends, and yet by times it is bitter. Fortunately for Mary, she had the warm circle of her own immediate belongings to return into, and could retire, as it were, into her citadel, and there smile at all the world. Her boys gave her that sweetest youthful adoration which is better than the love of lovers, and no painful ghost lurked in their memory—or so, at least, Mrs. Ochterlony thought.

CHAPTER IX.

THE Cottage changed its aspect greatly after the arrival of the regiment, and it was a change which lasted a long time, for the depôt was established at Carlisle, and Captain Askell got an appointment which smoothed the stony way of life a little for himself and his wife. Kirtell was very accessible and very pretty, and there was always a welcome to be had at the Cottage; and the regiment returned in the twinkling of an eye to its old regard for its Madonna Mary. The officers came about the house continually, to the great enlivenment of the parish in general. And Mrs. Kirkman came, and very soon made out that the vicar and his curate were both very incompetent, and did what she could to form a missionary nucleus, if not under Mrs. Ochterlony's wing, at least protected by her shadow; and the little Askells

came and luxuriated in the grass and the flowers; and Miss Sorbette and the doctor, who were still on the strength of the regiment, paid many visits, bringing with them the new people whom Mary did not know. When Hugh and Islay came home at vacation times, they found the house so lively, that it acquired new attractions for them, and Aunt Agatha, who was not so old as to be quite indifferent to society, said to herself with natural sophistry, that it was very good for the boys, and made them happier than two solitary women could have done by themselves, which no doubt was true. As for Mrs. Ochterlony herself, she said frankly that she was glad to see her friends; she liked to receive them in her own house. She had been rather poor in India, and not able to entertain them very splendidly; and though she was poor still, and the Cottage was a very modest little dwelling-place, it could receive the visitors, and give them pleasant welcome, and a pleasant meal, and pleasant faces, and cheerful companionship. Mrs. Ochterlony was not yet old, and she had lived a quiet life of late, so peaceful that the incipient wrinkles which life had outlined in her face, had been filled up and smoothed out by the quietness. She was in perfect health, and her eyes

were bright, and her complexion sweet, and her hair still gave by times a golden gleam out of its brown masses.

No wonder then that her old friends saw little or no change in her, and that her new ones admired her as much as she had ever been admired in her best days. Some women are sweet by means of being helpless, and fragile, and tender; and some have a loftier charm by reason of their veiled strength and composure, and calm of self-possession. Mary was one of the last; she was a woman not to lean, but to be leant upon; soft with a touch like velvet, and yet as steady as a rock—a kind of beauty which wears long, and does not spoil even by growing old.

It was a state of affairs very agreeable to everybody in the place, except, perhaps, to Will, who was very jealous of his mother. Hugh and Islay when they came home took it all for granted, in an open-hearted boyish way, and were no more afraid of anything Mrs. Ochterlony might do, than for their own existence. But Will was always there. He haunted the drawing-room, whoever might be in it at the moment; yet—though to Aunt Agatha's consciousness, the boy was never absent from the big Indian chair in the corner—he was at the

same time always ready to pursue his curate to the very verge of that poor gentleman's knowledge, and give him all the excitement of a hairbreadth 'scape ten times in a morning. Nobody could tell when he learned his lessons, or what time he had for study—for there he was always, taking in everything, and making comments in his own mind, and now and then interposing in the conversation to Aunt Agatha's indignation. Mary would not see it, she said; Mary thought that all her boys did was right—which was, perhaps, to some extent true; and it was said in the neighbourhood, as was natural, that so many gentlemen did not come to the Cottage for nothing; that Mrs. Ochterlony was still a young woman; that she had devoted herself to the boys for a long time, and that if she were to marry again, nobody could have any right to object. Such reports spring up in the country so easily, either with or without foundation: and Wilfrid, who found out everything, heard them, and grew very watchful and jealous, and even doubtful of his mother. Should such an idea have entered into *her* head, the boy felt that he would despise her; and yet at the same time he was very fond of her and filled with unbounded jealousy. While all the time, Mary herself was very glad to see her friends, and,

perhaps, was not entirely unconscious of exciting a certain respectful admiration, but had as little idea of severing herself from her past life, and making a new fictitious beginning, as if she had been eighty; and it never occurred to her to imagine that she was watched or doubted by her boy.

It was a pleasant revival, but it had its drawbacks—for one thing, Aunt Agatha did not, as she said, get on with all Mary's friends. There was between Miss Seton and Mrs. Kirkman an enmity which was to the death. The Colonel's wife, though she might be, as became her position, a good enough conservative in secular politics, was a revolutionary, or more than a revolutionary, an iconoclast, in matters ecclesiastical. She had no respect for anything, Aunt Agatha thought. A woman who works under the proper authorities, and reveres her clergyman, is a woman to be regarded with a certain respect, even if she is sometimes zealous out of season; but when she sets up on her own foundation, and sighs over the shortcomings of the clergy, and believes in neither rector nor curate, then the whole aspect of affairs is changed. "She believes in nobody but herself," Aunt Agatha said; "she has no respect for anything. I wonder how you can put up with

such a woman, Mary. She talks to our good vicar as if he were a boy at school—and tells him how to manage the parish. If that is the kind of person you think a good woman, I have no wish to be good, for my part. She is quite insufferable to me."

"She is often disagreeable," said Mary, "but I am sure she is good at the bottom of her heart."

"I don't know anything about the bottom of her heart," said Aunt Agatha; "from all one can see of the surface, it must be a very unpleasant place. And then that useless Mrs. Askell; she is quite strong enough to talk to the gentlemen and amuse them, but as for taking a little pains to do her duty, or look after her children—I must say I am surprised at your friends. A soldier's life is trying, I suppose," Miss Seton added. "I have always heard it was trying; but the gentlemen should be the ones to feel it most, and they are not spoiled. The gentlemen are very nice—most of them," Aunt Agatha added with a little hesitation, for there was one whom she regarded as Wilfrid did with jealous eyes.

"The gentlemen are further off, and we do not see them so clearly," said Mary; "and if you knew what it is to wander about, to

have no settled home, and to be ailing and poor——"

"My dear love," said Aunt Agatha, with a little impatience, "you might have been as poor, and you never would have been like that; and as for sick—— You know I never thought you had a very strong constitution—nor your sister either—my pretty Winnie! Do you think that sickness, or poverty, or anything else, could ever have brought down Winnie to be like that silly little woman?"

"Hush," said Mary, "Nelly is in the garden, and might hear."

"Nelly!" said Aunt Agatha, who felt herself suddenly pulled up short. "I have nothing to say against Nelly, I am sure. I could not help thinking last night, that some of these days she would make a nice wife for one of the boys. She is quite beginning to grow up now, poor dear. When I see her sitting there it makes me think of my Winnie;—not that she will ever be beautiful like Winnie. But Mary, my dear love, I don't think you are kind to me. I am sure you must have heard a great deal about Winnie, especially since she has come back to England, and you never tell me a word."

"My dear aunt," said Mary, with a little embarrassment, "you see all these people as

much as I do; and I have heard them telling you what news of her they know."

"Ah, yes," said Aunt Agatha, with a sigh. "They tell me she is here or there, but I know that from her letters; what I want to know is, something about her, how she looks, and if she is happy. She never *says* she is not happy, you know. Dear, dear! to think she must be past thirty now—two-and-thirty her last birthday—and she was only eighteen when she went away. You were not so long away, Mary——"

"But Winnie has not had my reason for coming back upon your hands, Aunt Agatha," said Mrs. Ochterlony, gravely.

"No," said Aunt Agatha: and again she sighed; and this time the sigh was of a kind which did not sound very complimentary to Captain Percival. It seemed to say "More's the pity!" Winnie had never come back to see the kind aunt who had been a mother to her. She said in her letters how unlucky she was, and that they were to be driven all round the world, she thought, and never to have any rest; but no doubt, if Winnie had been very anxious, she might have found means to come home. And the years were creeping on imperceptibly, and the boys growing up—even Will,

who was now almost as tall as his brothers. When such a change had come upon these children, what a change must there be in the wilful, sprightly, beautiful girl whose image reigned supreme in Aunt Agatha's heart. A sudden thought struck the old lady as she sighed. The little Askells were at Kirtell at the moment with the nurse, and Nelly, who was more than ever the mother of the little party. Aunt Agatha sat still for a little with her heart beating, and then she took up her work in a soft stealthy way, and went out into the garden. "No, my dear, oh no, don't disturb yourself," she said, with anxious deprecation to Mary, who would have risen too, "I am only going to look at the lilies;" and she was so conscientious that she did go and cast an undiscerning, preoccupied glance upon the lilies, though her real attraction was quite in an opposite quarter. At the other side, audible but not visible, was a little group which was pretty to look at in the afternoon sunshine. It was outside the garden, on the other side of the hedge, in the pretty green field, all white and yellow with buttercups and daisies, which belonged to the Cottage. Miss Seton's mild cow had not been able to crop down all that flowery fragrant growth, and the little Askells were wading in it, up to their knees in

the cool sweet grass, and feeding upon it and drawing nourishment out of it almost as much as the cow did. But in the corner close by the garden hedge there was a more advanced development of youthful existence. Nelly was seated on the grass, working with all her might, yet pausing now and then to lift her serious eyes to Will, who leant upon an old stump of oak which projected out of the hedge, and had the conversation all in his own hands. He was doing what a boy under such circumstances loves to do; he was startling, shocking, frightening his companion. He was saying a great deal that he meant and some things that he did not mean, and taking a great secret pleasure in the widening of Nelly's eyes and the consternation of her face. Will had grown into a very long lank boy, with joints which were as awkward as his brother's used to be, yet not in the same way, for the limbs that completed them were thin and meagre, and had not the vigour of Hugh's. His trousers were too short for him, and so were his sleeves. His hair had no curls in it, and fell down over his forehead. He was nearly sixteen, and he was thoroughly discontented—a misanthrope, displeased with everything without knowing why. But time had been kinder to Nelly, who was not long and lean like her com-

panion, but little and round and blooming, with the soft outlines and the fresh bloom of earliest youth just emerging out of childhood. Her eyes were brown, very serious, and sweet—eyes that had "seen trouble," and knew a great many more things in the world than were dreamt of in Will's philosophy; but then she was not so clever as Will, and his talk confused her. She was looking up to him and taking all in with a mixture of willing faith and instinctive scepticism which it was curious to see.

"You two are always together, I think," said Aunt Agatha, putting down a little camp-stool she had in her hand beside Nelly—for she had passed the age when people think of sitting on the grass. "What are you talking about? I suppose he brings all his troubles to you."

"Oh, no," said Nelly, with a blush, which was on Aunt Agatha's account, and not on Will's. He was a little older than herself actually; but Nelly was an experienced woman, and could not but look down amiably on such an unexercised inhabitant of the world as "only a boy."

"Then I suppose, my dear, he must talk to you about Greek and Latin," said Aunt Agatha, "which is a thing young ladies don't much care for: I am very sure old ladies don't. Is that what you talk about?"

"Oh, yes, often," said Nelly, brightening, as she looked at Will. That was not the sort of talk they had been having, but still it was true.

"Well," said Miss Seton, "I am sure he will go on talking as long as you will listen to him. But he must not have you all to himself. Did he tell you Hugh was coming home to see us? We expect him next week."

"Yes," said Nelly, who was not much of a talker. And then, being a little ashamed of her taciturnity, she added, "I am sure Mrs. Ochterlony will be glad,"

"We shall all be glad," said Aunt Agatha. "Hugh is very nice. We must have you to see a little more of him this time; I am sure you would like him. Then you will be well acquainted with all our family," the old lady continued, artfully approaching her real object; "for you know my dear Winnie, I think—I ought to say, Mrs. Percival; she is the dearest girl that ever was. You must have met her, my dear—— abroad."

Nelly looked up a little surprised. "We knew Mrs. Percival," she said, "but she——was not a girl at all. She was as old—as old as mamma—like all the other ladies," she added, hastily; for the word girl had limited meanings to Nelly, and she would have laughed at its

application in such a case, if she had not been a natural gentlewoman with the finest manners in the world.

"Ah, yes," said Aunt Agatha, with a sigh, "I forget how time goes; and she will always be a girl to me: but she was very beautiful, all the same; and she had such a way with children. Were you very fond of her, Nelly? Because, if that were so, I should love you more and more."

Nelly looked up with a frightened, puzzled look in Aunt Agatha's eyes. She was very soft-hearted, and had been used to give in to other people all her life; and she almost felt as if, for Aunt Agatha's sake, she could persuade herself that she had been fond of Mrs. Percival; but yet at the same time honesty went above all. "I do not think we knew them very well," she said. "I don't think mamma was very intimate with Mrs. Percival; that is, I don't think papa liked *him*," added Nelly, with natural art.

Aunt Agatha gave another sigh. "That might be, my dear," she said, with a little sadness; "but even when gentlemen don't take to each other, it is a great pity when it acts upon their families. Some of our friends here even were not fond at first of Captain Percival, but for my darling Winnie's sake—— You must have seen

her often at least; I wonder I never thought of asking you before. She was so beautiful, with such lovely hair, and the sweetest complexion. Was she looking well—and—and happy?" asked Aunt Agatha, growing anxious as she spoke, and looking into Nelly's face.

It was rather hard upon Nelly, who was one of those true women, young as she was, who can see what other women mean when they put such questions, and hear the heart beat under the words. Nelly had heard a great deal of talk in her day, and knew things about Mrs. Percival that would have made Aunt Agatha's hair stand on end with horror. But her heart understood the other heart, and could not have breathed a whisper that would wound it, for the world.

"I was such a little thing," said Nelly; "and then I always had the little ones to look after—mamma was so delicate. I remember the people's names more than themselves."

"You have always been a very good girl, I am sure," said Aunt Agatha, giving her young companion a sudden kiss, and with perhaps a faint instinctive sense of Nelly's forbearance and womanful skill in avoiding a difficult subject; but she sighed once more as she did it, and wondered to herself whether nobody would ever speak to her freely and fully of her child. And silence

ensued, for she had not the heart to ask more questions. Will, who had not found the conversation amusing, had gone in to find his mother, with a feeling that it was not quite safe to leave her alone, which had something to do with his frequent presence in the drawing-room; so that the old lady and Nelly were left alone in the corner of the fragrant field. The girl went on with her work, but Aunt Agatha, who was seated on her camp-stool, with her back against the oak stump, let her knitting fall upon her knee, and her eyes wander into vacancy with a wistful look of abstraction that was not natural to them. Nelly, who did not know what to say, and yet would have given a great deal to be able to say something, watched her from under the shadow of her curls, and at last saw Miss Seton's abstract eyes brighten up and wake into attention and life. Nelly looked round, and her impulse was to jump up in alarm when she saw it was her own mother who was approaching—her mother, whom Nelly had a kind of adoration for as a creature of divine helplessness, for whom everything had to be done, but in whose judgment she had an instinctive want of confidence. She jumped up and called to the children on the spur of this sudden impulse: "Oh! here is mamma,

we must go in," cried Nelly; and it gave her positive pain to see that Miss Seton's attitude remained unchanged, and that she had no intention of being disturbed by Mrs. Askell's approach.

"Oh how deliciously comfortable you are here," cried Emma, throwing herself down on the grass. "I came out to have a little fresh air and see after those tiresome children. I am sure they have been teasing you all day long; Nelly is not half severe enough, and nurse spoils them; and after a day in the open air like this, they make my head like to split when they come home at night."

"They have not been teasing me," said Aunt Agatha; "they have been very good, and I have been sitting here for a long time talking to Nelly. I wanted her to tell me something about my dear child, Mary's own sister—Mrs. Percival, you know."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Askell, making a troubled pause,—"and I hope to goodness you did not tell Miss Seton anything that was unpleasant," she said sharply, turning to Nelly. "You must not mind anything she said," the foolish little woman added; "she was only a child and she did not know. You should have asked me."

"What could there be that was not pleasant?"

cried Aunt Agatha. "If there is anything unpleasant that can be said about my Winnie, that is precisely what I ought to hear."

"Mamma!" cried Nelly, in what was intended to be a whisper of warning, though her anxiety made it shrill and audible. But Emma was not a woman to be kept back.

"Goodness, child, you have pulled my dress out of the gathers," she said. "Do you think *I* don't know what I am talking about? When I say unpleasant, I am sure I don't mean anything serious; I mean only, you know, that——and then her husband is such a man—I am sure I don't wonder at it, for my part."

"What is it your mamma does not wonder at, Nelly?" said Aunt Agatha, who had turned white and cold, and leaned back all feeble and broken upon the old tree.

"Her husband neglected her shamefully," said Emma; "it was a great sin for her friends to let her marry him; I am sure Mrs. Ochterlony knew what a dreadful character he had. And, poor thing, when she found herself so deserted —— Askell would never let me see much of her, and I had always such wretched health; but I always stood up for Mrs. Percival. She was young, and she had nobody to stand by her——"

"Oh, mamma," cried Nelly, "don't you see what you are doing? I think she is going to faint—and it will be all our fault."

"Oh, no; I am not going to faint," said Aunt Agatha, feebly; but when she laid back her head upon Nelly's shoulder, who had come to support her, and closed her eyes, she was like death, so pale did she look and ghastly; and then Mrs. Askell in her turn took fright.

"Goodness gracious! run and get some water, Will," she cried to Wilfrid, who had rejoined them. "I am sure there was nothing in what I said to make anybody faint. She was talked about a little, that was all—there was no harm in it. We have all been talked about, sometime or other. Why, fancy what a talk there was about our Madonna, her very self."

"About my mother?" said Wilfrid, standing bolt upright between Aunt Agatha, in her half swoon, and silly little Emma, who sat, a heap of muslin and ribbons upon the grass. He had managed to hear more about Mrs. Percival than anybody knew, and was very indifferent on the subject. And he was not alarmed about Aunt Agatha; but he was jealous of his mother, and could not bear even the smallest whisper in which there was any allusion to her.

"Goodness, boy, run and get some water!"

cried Mrs. Askell, jumping up from the grass in her fright. "I did not mean anything; there was nothing to be put out about—indeed there was not, Miss Seton. It was only a little silly talk; what happens to us all, you know: not half, nor quarter part so bad as—— Oh, goodness gracious, Nelly, don't make those ridiculous signs, as if it was you that was my mother, and I did not know what to say."

"Will!" said Nelly. Her voice was perfectly quiet and steady, but it made him start as he stood there jealous, and curious, and careless of everybody else. When he met her eye, he grew red and frowned, and made a momentary stand against her; but the next moment turned resolutely and went away. If it was for water, Aunt Agatha did not need it. She came to herself without any restorative; and she kissed Nelly, who had been whispering in her ear. "Yes, my dear I know you are right—it could have been nothing," she said faintly, with a wan sort of smile; "but I am not very strong, and the heat, you know——" And when she got up, she took the girl's arm, to steady her. Thus they went back to the house, Mrs. Askell following, holding up her hands in amazement and self-justification. "Could I tell that she was so weak?" Emma said to herself. "Goodness

gracious, how could anybody say it was my fault?" As for Nelly, she said nothing; but supported her trembling companion, and held the soft old hand firm on her arm. And when they approached the house, Nelly, carried away by her feelings, did, what in full possession of herself she never would have done. She bent down to Aunt Agatha's ear—for though she was not tall, she was a little taller at that moment than the poor old lady who was bowed down with weakness and the blow she had just received. "Mamma says things without meaning them," said Nelly, with an undutiful frankness, which it is to be hoped was forgiven her. "She does not mean any harm, and sometimes she says whatever comes into her head."

"Yes, my dear, your mamma is a very silly little woman," said Aunt Agatha, with a little of her old spirit; and she gave Nelly, who was naturally much startled by this unexpected vivacity, a kiss as she reached the door of her room and left her. The door closed, and the girl had no pretext nor right to follow. She turned away feeling as if she had received a sudden prick which stimulated all the blood in her veins, but yet yearning in her good little heart over Aunt Agatha who was alone. Miss Seton's room, to which she had retired, was on

note to Mrs. Percival, begging her now she was in England to come and see them at the Cottage. "I am getting old, my dear love, and I may not be long for this world, and you must let me see you before I die," Aunt Agatha said. She thought she felt weaker than usual after her agitation, and regarded this sentence, which was in a high degree effective and sensational, with some pride. She felt sure that such a thought would go to her Winnie's heart.

And so the Cottage lapsed once more into tranquillity, and into that sense that everything *must* go well which comes natural to the mind after a long interval of peace.

CHAPTER X.

" LIKE all your people, mamma," said Hugh, "and I like little Nelly best of all. She is a little jewel, and as fresh as a little rose."

"And such a thing might happen as that she might make you a nice little wife one of these days," said Aunt Agatha, who was always a match-maker in her heart.

Upon which Hugh nodded and laughed and grew slightly red, as became his years. "I had always the greatest confidence in your good sense, my dear aunt," he said in his laughing way, and never so much as thought of Wilfrid in the big Indian chair, who had been Nelly's constant companion for at least one long year.

"I should like to know what business he has with Nelly," said Will between his teeth.

"A great hulking fellow, old enough to be her father."

"She would never have *you*, Will," said Hugh, laughing; "girls always despise a fellow of their own age. So you need not look sulky, old boy. For that matter I doubt very much if she'd have me."

"You are presumptuous boys," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "to think she would have either of you. She has too much to do at home, and too many things to think of. *I* should like to have her all to myself," said Mary, with a sigh. She sighed, but she smiled; for though her boys could not be with her as Nelly might have been, still all was well with them, and the heart of their mother was content.

"My uncle wants you all to come over to Earlston," said Hugh. "I think the poor old boy is beginning to give in. He looks very shaky in the morning when he comes downstairs. I'd like to know what you think of him, mamma; I don't think his wanting to see you all is a good sign. He's awfully good when you come to know him," said Hugh, clearing his throat.

"Do you mean that Francis Ochterlony is ill?" said Aunt Agatha, with sudden interest. "Your mother must go and see him, but you must not ask me; I am an old woman, and I

have old-fashioned notions, you know—but a married lady can go anywhere. Besides he would not care for seeing me," Aunt Agatha added, with a slightly-wistful look, "it is so very — very many years since we used to——"

"I know he wants to see you," said Hugh, who could not help laughing a little; "and with so many people in the house I think you might risk it, Aunt Agatha. He stands awfully in awe of you, I can tell you. And there are to be a lot of people. It's a kind of coming of age affair," said Hugh. "I am to be set up on Psyche's pedestal, and everybody is to look at me and sing out, 'Behold the heir!' That's the sort of thing it's to be. You can bring anybody you like, you two ladies—little Nelly Askell, and all that sort of thing," he added, with a conscious laugh; and grew red again, not at thought of Nelly Askell, but with the thrill which "all that sort of thing" naturally brought into the young man's veins.

The face of Wilfrid grew darker and darker as he sat and listened. It was not a precocious passion for Nelly Askell that moved him. If Nelly had been his sister, his heart might still have swelled with a very similar sentiment. "He'll have *her* too," was what the boy said to

himself. There was no sort of justice or distribution in it; Hugh was the lucky fellow who had everything, while no personal appropriation whatever was to be permitted to Wilfrid. He could not engross his mother as he would have liked to do, for she loved Hugh and Islay just as well as she loved himself, and had friends and acquaintances, and people who came and talked, and occupied her time, and even one who was supposed to have the audacity to admire her. And there was no one else to supply the imperious necessity which existed in Will's mind, to be the chief object of somebody's thoughts. His curate had a certain awe of him, which was satisfactory enough in its way; but nobody watched and worshipped poor Will, or did anything more than love him in a reasonable unadoring way; and he had no sister whom he could make his slave, nor humble friend to whom he could be the centre of interest. Nelly's coming had been a God-send to the boy. She had found out his discontent, and taken to comforting him instinctively, and had been introduced into a world new to her by means of his fancies: and the budding woman had regarded the budding man with that curiosity, and wonder, and respect, and interest, which exists by nature between the two representatives of humanity. And now here was Hugh, who,

not content with being an Oxford scholar, and the heir of Earlston, and his mother's eldest son, and Sir Edward's favourite, and the most interesting member of the family to the parish in general, was about to seize on Nelly too. Will, though he was perhaps of a jealous temper, was not mean or envious, nor did he grudge his brother his elevation. But he thought it hard that all should go to one, and that there should be no shares: if he had had the arranging of it, it would have been otherwise arranged; Hugh should still have had Earlston, and any other advantages suited to his capacity—but as for Oxford and Nelly—— It was unfair—that was the sting; all to one, and nothing to the other. This sentiment made Wilfrid very unwilling to accompany the rest of the family to Earlston. He did not want to go and survey all the particulars of Hugh's good-fortune, and to make sure once again, as he had already so often decided, that Hugh's capacities were inferior to his luck, and that it was really of little advantage to him to be so well off. But Will's inclinations, as it happened, were not consulted on the subject; the expedition was all settled without any room being left for his protest. Aunt Agatha was to go, though she had very little desire to do so, being coy about Mr. Ochterlony's house, and

even not too well pleased to think that coyness was absurd in her case, and that she was old enough to go to anybody's house, and indeed do what she pleased. And Sir Edward was going, who was older than any of them, and was still inclined to believe that Francis Ochterlony and Agatha Seton might make it up; and then, though Mrs. Askell objected greatly, and could not tell what she was to do with the children, and limited the expedition absolutely to two days, Nelly was going too. Thus Will had to give in, and withdraw his opposition. It was, as Hugh said, "a coming of age sort of affair," but it was not precisely a coming of age, for that important event had taken place some time before, when Hugh, whose ambition was not literary, had been working like a coal-heaver to take his degree, and had managed to take it and please his uncle. But there was to be a great dinner to introduce the heir of Earlston to his country neighbours, and everything was to be conducted with as much solemnity as if it had been the heir-apparent's birthday. It was so great an occasion, that Mrs. Ochterlony got a new dress, and Aunt Agatha brought forth from among the sprigs of lavender her silver-grey which she wore at Winnie's marriage. It was not Hugh's marriage, but it was an event almost as impor-

tant; and if his own people did not try to do him credit, what was to be expected of the rest of the world?

And for Nelly Askell it was a very important crisis. She was sixteen, but up to this moment she had never had a dress "made long," and the excitement of coming to this grandeur, and of finding Hugh Ochterlony by her side, full of unspeakable politeness, was almost too much for Nelly; the latter complication was something she did not quite understand. Will, for his part, carried things with a high hand, and behaved to her as a brother behaves to the sister whom he tyrannizes over. It is true that she sometimes tyrannized over him in her turn, as has been seen, but they did not think it necessary to be civil, nor did either of them restrain their personal sentiments in case anything occurred they disapproved of. But Hugh was altogether different—Hugh was one of "the gentlemen;" he was grown up, he had been to the University, he rode, and shot, and hunted, and did everything that the gentlemen are expected to do—and he lowered his voice when he spoke to Nelly, and schemed to get near her, and took bouquets from the Cottage garden which were not intended for Mrs. Askell. Altogether, he was like the hero of a story to Nelly, and he made her feel as if

she, just that very moment as it were, translated into a long dress, was a young lady in a story too. Will was her friend and companion, but this was something quite different from Will; and to be taken to see his castle, and his guardian, and his future domains, and assist at the recognition of the young prince, was but the natural continuation of the romance. Nelly's new long dresses were only muslin, but they helped out the force of the situation, and intensified that vague thrill of commencing womanhood and power undreamed of, which Hugh's presence had helped to produce. Could it be possible that she could forget the children, and her mamma's head which was always so bad, and go off for two whole days from her duty? Mrs. Askell could scarcely believe it, and Nelly felt guilty when she realized the dreadful thought, but still she wanted to go; and she had no patience with Will's objections, but treated them with summary incivility. "Why shouldn't you like to go?" said Nelly, "you would like it very much if you were your brother. And I would not be jealous like you, not for all the world;" and then Nelly added, "it is not because it is a party that I care for it, but because it is such a pleasure to dear Mrs. Ochterlony, and to—Mr. Hugh——"

"Ah, yes, I knew you would go over to

Hugh's side," said Will; "I said so the very day he came here."

"Why should I go over to his side?" cried Nelly, indignantly; "but I am pleased to see people happy; and I am Mr. Hugh's friend, just as I am your friend," added the little woman, with dignity; "it is all for dear Mrs. Ochterlony's sake."

Thus it was that the new generation stepped in and took up all the foreground of the stage, just as Winnie and her love affairs had done, who was of the intermediate generation—thrusting the people whose play was played out, and their personal story over, into the background. Mary, perhaps, had not seen how natural it was, when her sister was the heroine; but when she began to suspect that the everlasting romance might, perhaps, begin again under her very eyes, with her children for the actors, it gave her a sweet shock of surprise and amusement. She had been in the shade for a long time, and yet she had still been the central figure, and had everything in her hands. What if, now, perhaps, Aunt Agatha's prophecy should come true, and Hugh, whose future was now secure, should find the little wife all ready for him at the very outset of his career? Such a possibility gave his mother, who had not yet arrived at the age

which can consent to be passive and superannuated, a curious thrill—but still it might be a desirable event. When Mary saw her son hanging over the fair young creature, whom she had coveted to be her daughter, a true perception of what her own future must be came over her. The boys *must* go away, and would probably marry and set up households, and the mother who had given up the best part of her life to them *must* remain alone. She was glad, and yet it went with a curious penetrating pang to her heart. Some women might have been jealous of the girl who had first revealed this possibility to them; but Mary, for her part, knew better, and saw that it was Nature and not Nelly that was to blame; and she was not a woman to go in the face of Nature. "Hugh will marry early," she said to Aunt Agatha, with a smile; but her heart gave a little flutter in her breast as she said it, and saw how natural it was. Islay was gone already, and very soon Will would have to go; and there would be no more for their mother to do but to live on, with her occupation over, and her personal history at an end. The best thing to do was to make up her mind to it. There was a little moisture in her eyes as she smiled upon Nelly the night before they set out for Earlston. The girl had to spend the previous

night at the Cottage, to be ready for their early start next day; and Mrs. Ochterlony smiled upon and kissed her, with a mingled yearning and revulsion. Ah, if she had but been her own—that woman-child! and yet it required a little effort to accept her for her own, at the cost, as it were, of her boy—for women are inconsistent, especially when they are women who have children. But one thing, at least, Mary was sure about, and that was, that her own share of the world would henceforward be very slight. Nothing would ever happen to her individually. Perhaps she regretted the agitations and commotions of life, and felt as if she would prefer still to endure them, and feel herself something in the world; but that was all over; Will *must* go. Islay was gone. Hugh would marry; and Mary's remaining years would flow on by necessity like the Kirtell, until some day they would come to a noiseless end. She said to herself that she ought to accept, and make up her mind to it; that boys must go out into the world, and quit the parent nest; and that she ought to be very thankful for the calm and secure provision which had been made for the rest of her life.

And next morning they started for Earlston, on the whole a very cheerful party. Nelly was so happy, that it did every one's heart good to

see her; and she had given Will what she called "such a talking to," that he was as good as gold, and made no unpleasant remarks. And Sir Edward was very suave and benign, though full of recollections which confused and embarrassed Aunt Agatha. "I remember travelling along this same road when we still thought it could be all arranged," he said; "and thinking what a long way it would be to have go to Earlston to see you; but there was no railroad then, and everything is very much changed."

"Yes, everything," said Aunt Agatha; and then she talked about the weather in a tremulous way. Sir Edward would not have spoken as he did, if he had not thought that even yet the two old lovers might make it up, which naturally made it very confusing for Aunt Agatha to be the one to go to Earlston, and make, as it were, the first advances. She felt just the same heart thumping a little against her breast, and her white hair and soft faded cheek could not be supposed to be so constantly visible to her as they were to everybody else; and if Francis Ochterlony were to take it into his head to imagine—— For Miss Seton, though nothing would have induced her to marry at her age, was not so certainly secure as her niece was that nothing now would ever happen in her individual life.

Nothing did happen, however, when they arrived at Earlston, where the master of the house received them, not with open arms, which was not his nature, but with all the enthusiasm he was capable of. He took them to see all his collections, everything he had that was most costly and rare. To go back to the house in this way, and see the scene of her former tortures; tortures which looked so light to look back upon, and were so amusing to think of, but which had been all but unbearable at the time, was strange to Mary. She told the story of her miseries, and they all laughed; but Mr. Ochterlony was still seen to change colour, when she pointed out the Etruscan vase which Hugh had taken into his hand, and the rococo chair which Islay had mounted. "This is the chair," the master of Earlston said; and he did not laugh so frankly as the rest, but turned aside to show Miss Seton his Henri II. porcelain. "It was nothing to laugh at, at the time," he said, confidentially, in a voice which sank into Aunt Agatha's heart; and, to restore her composure, she paid great attention to the Henri Deux ware. She said she remembered longing very much to have a set like that when she was a girl. "I never knew you were fond of china," said Mr. Ochterlony. "Oh, yes," Aunt Agatha replied; but she did not explain

that the china she had longed for was a toy service for her doll's and little companions' tea. Mr. Ochterlony put the costly cups away into a little cabinet, and locked it, after this; and he offered Aunt Agatha his arm, to lead her to the library, to see his collection there. She took it, but she trembled a little, the tender-hearted old woman. They looked such an old couple as they walked out of the room together, and yet there was something virginal and poetic about them, which they owed to their lonely lives. It was as if the roses that Hugh had just gathered for Nelly had been put away for half a century, and brought out again all dried and faded, but still roses, and with a lingering pensive perfume. And Sir Edward sat and smiled in a corner, and whispered to Mary to leave them to themselves a little: such things had been as that they might make it up.

There was a great dinner in the evening, at which Hugh's health was drunk, and everybody hoped to see him for many a happy year at Earlston, yet prayed that it might be many a year before he had to take any other place than the one he now occupied at his uncle's side. There were some county ladies present, who were very gracious to Mary, and anxious to know all about her boys, and whether she, too, was coming to

Earlston; but who were disposed to snub Nelly, who was not Mrs. Ochterlony's daughter, nor "any relation," and who was clearly an interloper on such an occasion. Nelly did not care much for being snubbed; but she was very glad to seize the moment to propitiate Wilfrid, who had come into the room looking in what Nelly called "one of his states of mind;" for it must not be forgotten that she was a soldier's daughter, and had been brought up exclusively in the regiment, and used many very colloquial forms of speech. She managed to glide to the other end of the room where Wilfrid was scowling over a collection of cameos without being noticed. To tell the truth, Nelly was easier in her mind when she was at a little distance from the Psyche and the Venus. She had never had any training in art, and she would have preferred to throw a cloak or, at the least, a lace shawl, or something, over those marble beauties. But she was, at least, wise enough to keep her sentiments to herself.

"Why have you come up so early, Will?" she said.

"What need I stay for, I wonder?" said Will; "I don't care for their stupid county talk. It is just as bad as parish talk, and not a bit more rational. I suppose my uncle must have

known better one time or other, or he could not have collected all these things here."

"Do you think they are very pretty?" said Nelly, looking back from a safe distance, and thinking that, however pretty they might be, they were not very suitable for a drawing-room, where people in general were in the habit of putting on more decorous garments: by which it will be perceived that she was a very ignorant little girl and knew nothing about it, and had no natural feeling for art.

"Pretty!" said Will, "you have only to look and see what they are—or to hear their names would be enough. And to think of all those asses downstairs turned in among them, that probably would like a few stupid busts much better,—whereas there are plenty of other people that would give their ears——"

"Oh, Will!" cried Nelly, "you are always harping on the old string!"

"I am not harping on any string," said Will. "All I want is, that people should stick to what they understand. Hugh might know how much money it was all worth, but I don't know what else he could know about it. If my uncle was in his senses and left things in shares as they do in France and everywhere where they have any understanding——"

"And then what would become of the house and the family?" cried Nelly,—"if you had six sons and Hugh had six sons—and then your other brother. They would all come down to have cottages and be a poor sort of clan—instead of going and making a fortune like a man, and leaving Earlston to be the head—" Probably Nelly had somewhere heard the argument which she stated in this bewildering way, or picked it out of a novel, which was the only kind of literature she knew much about——for it would be vain to assert that the principles of primogeniture had ever been profoundly considered in her own thoughts——"and if you were the eldest," she added, forsaking her argumentation, "I don't think you would care so much for everybody going shares."

"If I were the eldest it would be quite different," said Will. And then he devoted himself to the cameos, and would enter into no further explanation. Nelly sat down beside him in a resigned way, and looked at the cameos too, without feeling very much interest in them, and wondered what the children were doing, and whether mamma's head was bad; and her own astonishing selfishness in leaving mamma's headache and the children to take care of themselves, struck her vividly as she sat there in the

twilight and saw the Psyche and Venus, whom she did not approve of, gleaming white in the grey gloaming, and heard the loud voices of the ladies at the other end of the room. Then it began to come into her head how vain pleasures are, and how to do one's duty is all one ought to care for in the world. Mrs. Ochterlony was at the other end of the drawing-room, talking to the other ladies, and "Mr. Hugh" was downstairs with a quantity of stupid men, and Will was in one of his "states of mind." And the chances were that something had gone wrong at home; that Charley had fallen downstairs, or baby's bath been too hot for her, or something —a judgment upon Nelly for going away. At one moment she got so anxious thinking of it all, that she felt disposed to get up and run home all the way, to make sure that nothing had happened. Only that just then Aunt Agatha came to join them in looking over the cameos, and began to tell Nelly, as she often did, little stories about Mrs. Percival, and to call her "my dear love," and to tell her her dress looked very nice, and that nothing was so pretty as a sweet natural rose in a girl's hair. "I don't care for artificial flowers at your age, my dear," Aunt Agatha was saying, when the gentlemen came in and Hugh made his appearance; and

gradually the children's possible mischances and her mamma's headache faded out of Nelly's thoughts.

It was the pleasantest two days that had been spent at Earlston in the memory of man. Mrs. Ochterlony went over all the house with very different feelings from those she had felt when she was an inmate of the place, and smiled at her own troubles and found her misery very comical; and little Nelly, who never in all her life before had known what it was to have two days to herself, was so happy that she was perfectly wretched about it when she went to bed. For it had never yet occurred to Nelly, as it does to so many young ladies, that she had a right to everything that was delightful and pleasant, and that the people who kept her out of her rights were ogres and tyrants. She was frightened and rather ashamed of herself for being so happy; and then she made it up by resolving to be doubly good and make twice as much a slave of herself as ever as soon as she got home. This curious and unusual development of feeling probably arose from the fact that Nelly had never been brought up at all, so to speak, but had simply grown; and had too much to do to have any time for thinking of herself—which is the best of all possible bring-

ings up for some natures. As for Aunt Agatha, she went and came about this house, which could never be otherwise than interesting to her, with a wistful look and a flickering unsteady colour that would not have shamed even Nelly's sixteen-year old cheek. Miss Seton saw ghosts of what might have been in every corner; she saw the unborn faces shine beside the never-lighted fire. She saw herself as she might have been, rising up to receive her guests, sitting at the head of the long, full, cheerful table. It was a curious sensation, and made her stop to think now and then which was the reality and which the shadow; and yet there could be no doubt that there was in it a certain charm.

And there could be no doubt, either, that a certain sadness fell upon Mr. Ochterlony when they were all gone. He had a fire lighted in his study that night, though it was warm, "to make it look a little more cheerful," he said; and made Hugh sit with him long after the usual time. He sat buried in his great chair, with his thin, long limbs looking longer and thinner than ever, and his head a little sunk upon his breast. And then he began to moralize and give his nephew good advice.

"I hope you'll marry, Hugh," he said. "I don't think it's good to shut one's self out from the

society of women; they're very unscientific, but still—— And it makes a great difference in a house. When I was a young fellow like you—— But, indeed, it is not necessary to go back so far. A man has it in his power to amuse himself for a long time, but it doesn't last for ever—— And there are always things that might have been better otherwise——" Here Mr. Ochterlony made a long pause and stared into the fire, and after a while resumed without any preface: "When I'm gone, Hugh, you'll pack up all that Henri Deux ware and send it over to——to your Aunt Agatha. I never thought she cared for china. John will pack it for you—he is a very careful fellow for that sort of thing. I put it all into the Louis Quinze cabinet; now mind you don't forget."

"Time enough for that, sir," said Hugh, cheerfully, and not without a suppressed laugh; for the loves of Aunt Agatha and Francis Ochterlony were slightly comical to Hugh.

"That is all you know about it," said his uncle. "But I shall expect you altogether to be of more use in the world than I have been, Hugh; and you'll have more to do. Your father, you know, married when he was a boy, and went out of my reach; but you'll have all your people to look after. Don't play the

generous prince and spoil the boys—mind you don't take any stupid notions into your head of being a sort of Providence for them. It's a great deal better for them to make their own way; but you'll be always here, and you'll lend a helping hand. Stand by them—that's the great thing; and as for your mother, I needn't recommend her to your kindest care. She has done a great deal for you."

"Uncle, I wish you would not talk like this," said Hugh; "there's nothing the matter with you? What's the good of making a fellow uneasy and sending him uncomfortable to bed? Leave those sort of things till you're old and ill, and then I'll attend to what you say."

Mr. Ochterlony softly shook his head. "You wont forget about the Henri Deux," he said; and then he paused again and laughed as it were under his breath, with a kind of laugh that was pathetic and full of quaint tenderness. "If it had ever come to that, I don't think you would have been any the worse," he added; "we were not the sort of people to have heirs," and the laugh faded into a lingering, wistful smile, half sad, half amused, with which on his face, he sat for a long time and gazed into the fading fire. It was, perhaps, simply that the presence of such visitors had stirred up the old recollections in his

heart—perhaps that it felt strange to him to look back on his own past life in the light thrown upon it by the presence of his heir, and to feel that it was ending, while yet, in one sense, it had never begun. As for Hugh, to tell the truth, he was chiefly amused by his uncle's reflective mood. He thought, which no doubt was to some extent true, that the old man was thinking of an old story which had come to nothing, and of which old Aunt Agatha was the heroine. There was something touching in it he could not but allow, but still he gave a laugh within himself at the superannuated romance. And all that immediately came of it, was the injunction not to forget about the Henri Deux.

CHAPTER XI.

OF the visit to Earlston, this was all that came immediately; but yet, if anybody had been there with clear-sighted eyes, there might have been other results perceptible and other symptoms of a great change at hand. Such little shadows of an event impending might have been traced from day to day if that once possible lady of the house, whose ghost Aunt Agatha had met with in all the rooms, had been there to watch over its master. There being nobody but Hugh, everything was supposed to go on in its usual way. Hugh had come to be fond of his uncle, and to look up to him in many ways; but he was young, and nothing had ever occurred to him to put insight into his eyes. He thought Mr. Ochterlony was just as usual—and so he was; and yet there were some things that were not as usual, and which might have aroused an ex-

perienced observer. And in the meantime something happened at the Cottage, where things did not happen often, which absorbed everybody's thoughts for the moment, and threw Earlston and Mr. Ochterlony entirely into the shade.

It happened on the very evening after their return home. Aunt Agatha had been troubled with a headache on the previous night—she said, from the fatigue of the journey, though possibly the emotions excited at Earlston had something to do with it—and had been keeping very quiet all day; Nelly Askell had gone home, eager to get back to her little flock, and to her mother, who was the greatest baby of all; Mary had gone out upon some village business; and Aunt Agatha sat alone, slightly drowsy and gently thoughtful, in the summer afternoon. She was thinking, with a soft sigh, that perhaps everything was for the best. There are a great many cases in which it is very difficult to say so—especially when it seems the mistake or blindness of man, instead of the direct act of God, that has brought the result about. Miss Seton had a meek and quiet spirit; and yet it seemed strange to her to make out how it could be for the best that her own life and her old lover's should thus end, as it were, unfulfilled, and all through his foolishness. Looking at it in an abstract point

of view, she almost felt as if she could have told him of it, had he been near enough to hear. Such a different life it might have been to both: and now the moment for doing anything had long past, and the two barren existences were alike coming to an end. This was what Miss Seton could not help thinking; and feeling as she did that it was from beginning to end a kind of flying in the face of Providence, it was difficult to see how it could be for the best. If it had been her own fault, no doubt she would have felt as Mr. Ochterlony did, a kind of tender and not unpleasant remorse; but one is naturally less tolerant and more impatient when one feels that it is not one's own, but another's fault. The subject so occupied her mind, and her activity was so lulled to rest by the soft fatigue and languor consequent upon the ending of the excitement, that she did not take particular notice how the afternoon glided away. Mary was out, and Will was out, and no visitor came to disturb the calm. Miss Seton had cares of more immediate force even at that moment—anxieties and apprehensions about Winnie, which had brought of late many a sickening thrill to her heart; but these had all died away for the time before the force of recollections and the interest of her own personal story thus revived without any will of

her own; and the soft afternoon atmosphere, and the murmuring of the bees, and the roses at the open windows, and Kirtell flowing audible but unseen, lulled Aunt Agatha, and made her forget the passage of time. Then all at once she roused herself with a start. Perhaps—though she did not like to entertain such an idea—she had been asleep, and heard it in a dream; or perhaps it was Mary, whose voice had a family resemblance. Miss Seton sat upright in her chair after that first start and listened very intently, and said to herself that of course it must be Mary. It was she who was a fantastical old woman to think she heard voices which in the course of nature could not be within hearing. Then she observed how late it was, and that the sunshine slanted in at the west window and lay along the lawn outside almost in a level line. Mary was late, later than usual; and Aunt Agatha blushed to confess, even to herself, that she must have, as she expressed it, "just closed her eyes," and had a little dream in her solitude. She got up now briskly to throw this drowsiness off, and went out to look if Mary was coming, or Will in sight, and to tell Peggy about the tea—for nothing so much revives one as a cup of tea when one is drowsy in the afternoon. Miss Seton went across the little lawn, and the sun shone so

strongly in her eyes as she reached the gate that she had to put up her hand to shade them, and for the moment could see nothing. Was that Mary so near the gate? The figure was dark against the sunshine, which shone right into Aunt Agatha's eyes, and made everything black between her and the light. It came drifting as it were between her and the sun, like the phantom ship in the mariner's vision. She gazed and did not see, and felt as if a kind of insanity was taking possession of her. "Is it Mary?" she said, in a trembling voice, and at the same moment *felt* by something in the air that it was not Mary. And then Aunt Agatha gave such a cry as brought Peggy, and indeed all the household, in alarm to the door.

It was a woman who looked as old as Mary, and did not seem ever to have been half so fair. She had a shawl drawn tightly round her shoulders, as if she were cold, and a veil over her face. She was of a very thin meagre form, with a kind of forlorn grace about her, as if she might have been splendid under better conditions. Her eyes were hollow and large, her cheek-bones prominent, her face worn out of all freshness, and possessing only what looked like a scornful recollection of beauty. The noble form had missed its development, the fine capa-

bilities had been checked or turned in a false direction. When Aunt Agatha uttered that great cry which brought Peggy from the utmost depths of the house, the new comer showed no corresponding emotion. She said, "No; it is I," with a kind of bitter rather than affectionate meaning, and stood stock-still before the gate, and did not even make a movement to lift her veil. Miss Seton made a tremulous rush forward to her, but she did not advance to meet it; and when Aunt Agatha faltered and was likely to fall, it was not the stranger's arm that interposed to save her. She stood still, neither advancing nor going back. She read the shock, the painful recognition, the reluctant certainty in Miss Seton's eye. She was like the returning prodigal so far, but she was not content with his position. It was no happiness to her to go home, and yet it ought to have been; and she could not forgive her aunt for feeling the shock of the recognition. When she roused herself, after a moment, it was not because she was pleased to come home, but because it occurred to her that it was absurd to stand still and be stared at, and make a scene.

And when Peggy caught her mistress in her arms, to keep her from falling, the stranger made a step forward and gave her a hurried

kiss, and said, "It is I, Aunt Agatha. I thought you would have known me better. I will follow you directly;" and then turned to take out her purse, and give a shilling to the porter, who had carried her bag from the station —which was a proceeding which they all watched in consternation, as if it had been something remarkable. Winnie was still Winnie, though it was difficult to realize that Mrs. Percival was she. She was coming back wounded, resentful, remorseful to her old home; and she did not mean to give in, nor show the feelings of a prodigal, nor gush forth into affectionateness. To see her give the man the shilling brought Aunt Agatha to herself. She raised her head from Peggy's shoulder, and stood upright, trembling, but self-restrained. "I am a silly old woman to be so surprised," she said; "but you did not write to say what day we were to expect you, my dear love."

"I did not write anything about it," said Winnie; "for I did not know. But let me go in, please; don't let us stay here."

"Come in, my darling," said Aunt Agatha. "Oh, how glad, how thankful, how happy I am, Winnie, my dear love, to see you again!"

"I think you are more shocked than glad," said Winnie; and that was all she said, until

they had entered the room where Miss Seton had just left her maiden dreams. Then the wanderer, instead of throwing herself into Aunt Agatha's kind longing arms, looked all round her with a strange passionate mournfulness and spitefulness. "I don't wonder you were shocked," she said, going up to the glass, and looking at herself in it. "You, all just the same as ever, and such a change in me!"

"Oh, Winnie, my darling!" cried Aunt Agatha, throwing herself upon her child with a yearning which was no longer to be restrained; "do you think there can ever be any change in you to me? Oh, Winnie, my dear love! come and let me look at you; let me feel I have you in my arms at last, and that you have really come home."

"Yes, I have come home," said Winnie, suffering herself to be kissed. "I am sure I am very glad that you are pleased. Of course Mary is still here, and her children? Is she going to marry again? Are her boys as tiresome as ever? Yes, thank you, I will take my things off—and I should like something to eat. But you must not make too much of me, Aunt Agatha, for I have not come only for a day."

"Winnie, dear, don't you know if it was for your good I would like to have you for ever?"

cried poor Aunt Agatha, trembling so that she could scarcely form the words.

And then for a moment, the strange woman, who was Winnie, looked as if she too was moved. Something like a tear came into the corner of her eye. Her breast heaved with one profound, unnatural, convulsive swell. "Ah, you don't know me now," she said, with a certain sharpness of anguish and rage in her voice. Aunt Agatha did not understand it, and trembled all the more; but her good genius led her, instead of asking questions as she was burning to do, to take off Winnie's bonnet and her shawl, moving softly about her with her soft old hands, which shook yet did their office. Aunt Agatha did not understand it, but yet it was not so very difficult to understand. Winnie was abashed and dismayed to find herself there among all the innocent recollections of her youth—and she was full of rage and misery at the remembrance of all her injuries, and to think of the explanation which she would have to give. She was even angry with Aunt Agatha because she did not know what manner of woman her Winnie had grown—but beneath all this impatience and irritation was such a gulf of wretchedness and wrong that even the unreasonableness took a kind of miserable reason. She did well to be

angry with herself, and all the world. Her friends ought to understand the difference, and see what a changed creature she was, without exacting the humiliation of an explanation; and yet at the same time the poor soul in her misery was angry to perceive that Aunt Agatha did see a difference. She suffered her bonnet and shawl to be taken off, but started when she felt Miss Seton's soft caressing hand upon her hair. She started partly because it was a caress she was unused to, and partly that her hair had grown thin and even had some grey threads in it, and she did not like *that* change to be observed; for she had been proud of her pretty hair, and taken pleasure in it as so many women do. She rose up as she felt that touch, and took the shawl which had been laid upon a chair.

"I suppose I can have my old room," she said. "Never mind coming with me as if I was a visitor. I should like to go upstairs, and I ought to know the way, and be at home here."

"It is not for that, my darling," said Aunt Agatha, with hesitation; "but you must have the best room, Winnie. Not that I mean to make a stranger of you. But the truth is one of the boys——and then it is too small for what you ought to have now."

"One of the boys—which of the boys?" said

Winnie. "I thought you would have kept my old room—I did not think you would have let your house be overrun with boys. I don't mind where it is, but let me go and put my things somewhere and make myself respectable. Is it Hugh that has my room?"

"No,—Will," said Aunt Agatha, faltering; "I could change him, if you like, but the best room is far the best. My dear love, it is just as it was when you went away. Will! Here is Will. This is the little one that was the baby —I don't think that you can say he is not changed."

"Not so much as I am," said Mrs. Percival, under her breath, as turning round she saw the long-limbed, curious boy, with his pale face and inquiring eyes, standing in the open window. Will was not excited, but he was curious; and as he looked at the stranger, though he had never seen her before, his quick mind set to work on the subject, and he put two and two together and divined who it was. He was not like her in external appearance—at least he had never been a handsome boy, and Winnie had still her remains of wasted beauty—but yet perhaps they were like each other in a more subtle, invisible way. Winnie looked at him, and she gave her shoulders a shrug and turned impatiently away.

"It must be a dreadful nuisance to be interrupted like that, whatever you may be talking about," she said. "It does not matter what room I am to have, but I suppose I may go upstairs?"

"My dear love, I am waiting for you," said poor Aunt Agatha, anxiously. "Run, Will, and tell your mother that my dear Winnie has come home. Run as fast as ever you can, and tell her to make haste. Winnie, my darling, let me carry your shawl. You will feel more like yourself when you have had a good rest; and Mary will be back directly, and I know how glad she will be."

"Will she?" said Winnie; and she looked at the boy and heard him receive his instructions, and felt his quick eyes go through and through her. "He will go and tell his mother the wreck I am," she said to herself, with bitterness; and felt as if she hated Wilfrid. She had no children to defend and surround her, or even to take messages. No one could say, referring to her, "Go and tell your mother." It was Mary that was well off, always the fortunate one, and for the moment poor Winnie felt as if she hated the keen-eyed boy.

Will, for his part, went off to seek his mother, leaving Aunt Agatha to conduct her dear and

welcome, but embarrassing and difficult, guest upstairs. He did not run, nor show any symptoms of unnecessary haste, but went along in a very steady, leisurely way. He was so far like Winnie that he did not see any occasion for disturbing himself much on account of other people. He went to seek Mrs. Ochterlony with his hands in his pockets, and his mind working steadily at the new position of affairs. Why this new-comer should have arrived so unexpectedly? why Aunt Agatha should look so anxious, and helpless, and confused, as if, notwithstanding her love, she did not know what to do with her visitor? were questions which exercised all Will's faculties. He walked up to his mother, who was coming quietly along the road from the village, and joined her without disturbing himself. "Aunt Agatha sent me to look for you," he said, and turned with her towards the Cottage in the calmest way.

"I am afraid she thought I was late," said Mary.

"It was not that," said Will. "Mrs. Percival had just come, so far as I could understand, and she sent me to tell you."

"Mrs. Percival?" cried Mary, stopping short. "Whom do you mean? Not Winnie? Not my sister? You must have made some mistake."

"I think it was. It looked like her," said Will, in his calm way.

Mary stood still, and her breath seemed to fail her for the moment; she had what the French call a *serrement du cœur*. It felt as if some invisible hand had seized upon her heart and compressed it tightly; and her breathing failed, and a chill went through her veins. The next moment her face flushed with shame and self-reproach. Could she be thinking of herself and any possible consequences, and grudging her sister the only natural refuge which remained to her? She was incapable for the moment of asking any further questions, but went on with a sudden hasty impulse, feeling her head swim, and her whole intelligence confused. It seemed to Mary, for the moment, though she could not have told how, as if there was an end of her peaceful life, of her comfort, and all the good things that remained to her; a chill presentiment, confounding and inexplicable, went to her heart; and at the same time she felt utterly ashamed and horrified to be thinking of herself at all, and not of poor Winnie, the returned wanderer. Her thoughts were so busy and full of occupation that she had gone a long way before it occurred to her to say anything to her boy.

"You say it looked like her, Will," she began at last, taking up the conversation where she had left off; "tell me, what did she look like?"

"She looked just like other women," said Will; "I didn't remark any difference. As tall as you, and a sort of a long nose. Why I thought it looked like her, was because Aunt Agatha was in an awful way."

"What sort of a way?" cried Mary.

"Oh, well, I don't know. Like a hen, or something—walking round her, and looking at her, and cluck-clucking; and yet all the same as if she'd like to cry."

"And Winnie," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "how did she look?—that is what I want most to know."

"Awfully bored," said Will. He was so sometimes himself, when Aunt Agatha paid any special attentions to him, and he said it with feeling. This was almost all the conversation that passed between them as Mrs. Ochterlony hurried home. Poor Winnie! Mary knew better than Miss Seton did what a dimness had fallen upon her sister's bright prospects—how the lustre of her innocent name had been tarnished, and all the freshness and beauty gone out of her life; and Mrs. Ochterlony's heart smote her for the momentary reference to her-

self, which she had made without meaning it, when she heard of Winnie's return. Poor Winnie! if the home of her youth was not open to her, where could she find refuge? if her aunt and her sister did not stand by her, who would? and yet—— The sensation was altogether involuntary, and Mary resisted it with all her might; but she could not help a sort of instinctive sense that her peace was over, and that the storms and darkness of life were about to begin again.

When she went in hurriedly to the drawing-room, not expecting to see anybody, she found, to her suprise, that Winnie was there, reclining in an easy chair, with Aunt Agatha in wistful and anxious attendance on her. The poor old lady was hovering about her guest, full of wonder, and pain, and anxious curiosity. Winnie as yet had given no explanation of her sudden appearance. She had given no satisfaction to her perplexed and fond companion. When she found that Aunt Agatha did not leave her, she had come downstairs again, and dropped listlessly into the easy chair. She wanted to have been left alone for a little, to have realized all that had befallen her, and to feel that she was not dreaming, but was actually in her old home. But Miss Seton would have thought it the

greatest unkindness, the most signal want of love and sympathy, and all that a wounded heart required, to leave Minnie alone. And she was glad when Mary came to help her to rejoice over, and overwhelm with kindness, her child who had been lost and was found.

"It is your dear sister, thank God!" she cried, with tears. "Oh, Mary! to think we should have her again; to think she should be here after so many changes! And our own Winnie through it all. She did not write to tell us, for she did not quite know the day——"

"I did not know things would go further than I could bear," said Winnie, hurriedly. "Now Mary is here, I know you must have some explanation. I have not come to see you; I have come to escape, and hide myself. Now, if you have any kindness, you wont ask me any more just now. I came off last night because he went too far. There! that is why I did not write. I thought you would take me in, whatever my circumstances might be."

"Oh, Winnie, my darling! then you have not been happy?" said Aunt Agatha, tearfully clasping Winnie's hands in her own, and gazing wistfully into her face.

"Happy!" she said, with something like a laugh, and then drew her hand away. "Please,

let us have tea or something, and don't question me any more."

It was then only that Mary interposed. Her love for her sister was not the absorbing love of Aunt Agatha; but it was a wiser affection. And she managed to draw the old lady away, and leave the new-comer to herself for the moment. "I must not leave Winnie," Aunt Agatha said; "I cannot go away from my poor child; don't you see how unhappy and suffering she is? You can see after everything yourself, Mary, there is nothing to do; and tell Peggy——"

"But I have something to say to you," said Mary, drawing her reluctant companion away, to Aunt Agatha's great impatience and distress. As for Winnie, she was grateful for the moment's quiet, and yet she was not grateful to her sister. She wanted to be alone and undisturbed, and yet she rather wanted Aunt Agatha's suffering looks and tearful eyes to be in the same room with her. She wanted to resume the sovereignty, and to be queen and potentate the moment after her return; and it did not please her to see another authority, which prevailed over the fascination of her presence. But yet she was glad to be alone. When they left her, she lay back in her chair, in a settled calm of passion which was at once twenty times more calm than their peacefulness,

and twenty times more passionate than their excitement. She knew whence she came, and why she came, which they did not. She knew the last step which had been too far, and was still tingling with the sense of outrage. She had in her mind the very different scene she had left, and which stood out in flaming outlines against the dim background of this place, which seemed to have stopped still just where she left it, and in all these years to have grown no older; and her head began to steady a little out of the whirl. If he ventured to seek her here, she would turn to bay and defy him. She was too much absorbed by active enmity, and rage, and indignation, to be moved by the recollections of her youth, the romance that had been enacted within these walls. On the contrary, the last exasperation which had filled her cup to overflowing was so much more real than anything that followed, that Aunt Agatha was but a pale ghost to Winnie, flitting dimly across the fiery surface of her own thoughts; and this calm scene in which she found herself, almost without knowing how, felt somehow like a pasteboard cottage in a theatre, suddenly let down upon her for the moment. She had come to escape and hide herself, she said, and that was in reality what she

intended to do; but at the same time the thought of living there, and making the change real, had never occurred to her. It was a sudden expedient, adopted in the heat of battle; it was not a flight for her life.

"She has come back to take refuge with us, the poor darling," said Aunt Agatha. "Oh, Mary, my dear love, don't let us be hard upon her! She has not been happy, you heard her say so, and she has come home; let me go back to Winnie, my dear. She will think we are not glad to see her, that we don't sympathize—And oh, Mary, her poor dear wounded heart! when she looks upon all the things that surrounded her, when she was so happy!——"

And Mary could not succeed in keeping the tender old lady away, nor in stilling the thousand questions that bubbled from her kind lips. All she could do was to provide for Winnie's comfort, and in her own person to leave her undisturbed. And the night fell over a strangely disquieted household. Aunt Agatha could not tell whether to cry for joy or for distress, whether to be most glad that Winnie had come home, or most concerned and anxious how to account for her sudden arrival, and keep up appearances, and prevent the parish from

thinking that anything unpleasant had happened. In Winnie's room there was such a silent tumult of fury, and injury, and active conflict, as had never existed before near Kirtell side. Winnie was not thinking, nor caring where she was; she was going over the last battle from which she had fled, and anticipating the next, and instead of making herself wretched by the contrast of her former happiness, felt herself only, as it were, in a painted retirement, no more real than a dream. What was real was her own feelings, and nothing else on earth. As for Mary, she too was strangely, and she thought ridiculously affected by her sister's return. She tried to explain to herself that except for her natural sympathy for Winnie, it affected her in no other way, and was indignant with herself for dwelling upon a possible derangement of domestic peace, as if that could not be guarded against, or even endured if it came about. But nature was too strong for her. It was not any fear for the domestic peace that moved her; it was an indescribable conviction that this unlooked-for return was the onslaught signal for a something lying in wait—that it was the touch of revolution, the opening of the floodgates—and that henceforward her life of tranquil

confidence was over, and that some mysterious trouble which she could not at present identify, had been let loose upon her, let it come sooner or later, from that day.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER that first bewildered night, and when the morning came, the recollection that Winnie was in the house had a curious effect upon the thoughts of the entire household. Even Aunt Agatha's uneasy joy was mingled with many feelings that were not joyful. She had never had anything to do before with wives who "were not happy." Any such cases which might have come to her knowledge among her acquaintance she had been in the way of avoiding and tacitly condemning. "A man may be bad," she had been in the habit of saying, "but still if his wife had right feelings"—and she was in the way of thinking that it was to a woman's credit to endure all things, and to make no sign. Such had been the pride and the principles of Aunt Agatha's generation. But now, as in so many cases, principle and theory came right in the face

of fact, and gave way. Winnie must be right at whatever cost. Poor Winnie! to think what she had been, to remember her as she left Kirtell splendid in her bridal beauty, and to look at her now! Such arguments made an end of all Aunt Agatha's old maiden sentiments about a wife's duty; but nevertheless her heart still ached. She knew how she would herself have looked upon a runaway wife, and she could not endure to think that other people would so look upon Winnie; and she dried an indignant tear, and made a vow to herself to carry matters with a high hand, and to maintain her child's discretion, and wisdom, and perfect propriety of action, in the face of all comers. "My dear child has come to pay me a visit, the very first chance she has had," she said to herself, rehearsing her part; "I have been begging and begging her to come, and at last she has found an opportunity. And to give me a delightful surprise, she never named the day. It was so like Winnie." This was what, omitting all notice of the feelings which made the surprise far from delightful, Aunt Agatha made up her mind to say.

As for Winnie, when she woke up in the sunshine and stillness, and heard nothing but the birds singing, and Kirtell in the distance murmuring below her window, her heart stood still

for a moment and wondered; and then a few hot salt tears came scalding to her eyes; and then she began over again in her own mind the recapitulation of her wrongs. She thought very little indeed of Aunt Agatha, or of her present surroundings. What she thought of was the late scenes of exciting strife she had gone through, and future scenes which might still be before her, and what he would say to her, and what she would say to him; for matters had gone so far between them that the constantly progressing duel was as absorbing as the first dream of love, and swallowed up every thought. It cost her an effort to be patient with all the morning greetings, with Aunt Agatha's anxious talk at the breakfast-table, and discussion of the old neighbours, whom, doubtless, Winnie, she thought, would like to hear of. Winnie did not care a great deal for the old neighbours, nor did she take much interest in hearing of the boys. Indeed she did not know the boys. They had been but babies when she went away, and she had no acquaintance with the new creatures who bore their names. It gave her a little pang when she looked at Mary and saw the results of peace and tranquillity in her face, which seemed to have grown little older—but that was almost the sole thing that drew Winnie from her own

thoughts. There was a subtle sort of connexion between it and the wrongs which were rankling at her heart.

"There used to be twelve years between us," she said, abruptly. "I was eighteen when Mary was thirty. I think anybody that saw us would ask which was the eldest now."

"My darling, you are thin," said poor Aunt Agatha, anxiously; "but a few weeks of quiet and your native air will soon round out your dear cheeks——"

"Well," said Winnie, paying no attention, "I suppose it's because I have been living all the time, and Mary hasn't. It is I that have the wrinkles—but then I have not been like the Sleeping Beauty. I have been working hard at life all this time."

"Yes," said Mary, with a smile, "it makes a difference:—and of the two I think I would rather live. It is harder work, but there is more satisfaction in it."

"Satisfaction!" Winnie said, bitterly. There had been no satisfaction in it to her, and she felt fierce and angry at the word—and then her eye fell upon Will, who had been listening as usual. "I wonder you keep that great boy there," she said; "why isn't he doing something? You ought to send him to the army, or

put him to go through some examinations. What does he want at his mother's lap? You should mind you don't spoil them, Mary. Home is the ruin of boys. I have always heard so wherever I have been."

"My dear love," cried Aunt Agatha, fearful that Mary might be moved to reply, "it is very interesting to hear you; but I want you to tell me a little about yourself. Tell me about yourself, my darling—if you are fixed *there* now, you know; and all where you have been."

"Before that boy?" said Winnie, with a kind of smile, looking Wilfrid in the face with her great sunken eyes.

"Now, Will, be quiet, and don't say anything impertinent," cried Aunt Agatha. "Oh, my darling, never mind him. He is strange, but he is a good boy at the bottom. I should like to hear about all my dearest child has been doing. Letters never tell all. Oh, Winnie, what a pleasure it is, my love, to see your dear face again."

"I am glad you think so, aunt—nobody else does, that I know of; and you are likely to have enough of it," said Winnie, with a certain look of defiance at her sister and her sister's son.

"Thank you, my dear love," said Aunt

Agatha, trembling; for the maid was in the room, and Miss Seton's heart quailed with fear lest the sharp eyes of such a domestic critic should be opened to something strange in the conversation. "I am so glad to hear you are going to pay me a long visit; I did not like to ask you just the first morning, and I was dreadfully frightened you might soon be going again; you owe me something, Winnie, for staying away all these long years."

Aunt Agatha in her fright and agitation continued this speech until she had talked the maid safely out of the room, and then, being excited, she fell, without knowing it, into tears.

Winnie leant back in her chair and folded a light shawl she wore round her, and looked at Miss Seton. In her heart she was wondering what Aunt Agatha could possibly have to cry about; what could ever happen to *her*, that made it worth her while to cry? But she did not put this sentiment into words.

"You will be tired of me before I go," she said, and that was all; not a word, as Aunt Agatha afterwards explained to Mary, about her husband, or about how she had been living, or anything about herself. And to take her by the throat, as it were, and demand that she should

account for herself, was not to be thought of. The end was that they all dispersed to their various occupations, and that the day went on almost as if Winnie was not there. But yet the fact that Winnie was there tinged every one's thoughts, and made a difference in every corner of the house. They had all their occupations to betake themselves to, but she had nothing to do, and unconsciously every individual in the place took to observing the new-comer, with that curious kind of feminine observation which goes so little way, and yet goes so far. She had brought only a portmanteau with her, a gentleman's box, not a lady's, and yet she made no move towards unpacking, but let her things remain in it, notwithstanding that the wardrobe was empty and open, and her dresses, if she had brought any, must have been crushed up like rags in that tight enclosure. And she sat in the drawing-room with the open windows, through which every one in the house now and then got a glimpse of her, doing nothing, not even reading; she had her thin shawl round her shoulders, though it was so warm, and she sat there with nothing to occupy her, like a figure carved out of stone. Such an attitude, in a woman's eyes, is the embodiment of everything that is saddest, and most listless, and forlorn. Doing nothing,

not trying to take an interest in anything, careless about the books, indifferent to the garden, with no curiosity about anybody or anything. The sight of her listless figure filled Aunt Agatha with despair.

And then, to make things worse, Sir Edward made his appearance the very next day to inquire into it all. It was hard to make out how he knew, but he did know, and no doubt all the parish knew, and were aware that there was something strange about it. Sir Edward was an old man, about eighty now, feeble but irreproachable, with lean limbs that now and then were slightly unsteady, but a toilette which was always everything it ought to be. He came in, cool and fresh in his summer morning dress, but his brow was puckered with anxiety, and there was about him that indescribable air of coming to see about it, which has so painful an effect in general upon the nerves of the persons whose affairs are to be put under investigation. When Sir Edward made his appearance at the open window, Aunt Agatha instinctively rose up and put herself before Winnie, who, however, did not show any signs of disturbance in her own person, but only wound herself up more closely in her shawl.

"So Winnie has come to see us at last," said Sir Edward, and he came up to her and took

both her hands, and kissed her forehead in a fatherly way. He did so almost without looking at her, and then he gave an unaffected start; but he had too much delicacy to utter the words that came to his lips. He did not say how much changed she was, but he gave Aunt Agatha a pitiful look of dismay and astonishment as he sat down, and this Winnie did not fail to see.

"Yes, at last," cried Aunt Agatha, eagerly. "I have begged and begged of her to come, and was wondering what answer I should get, when she was all the while planning me such a delightful surprise; but how did you know?"

"News travels fast," said Sir Edward, and then he turned to the stranger. "You will find us much changed, Winnie. We are getting old people now, and the boys whom you left babies—you must see a great deal of difference."

"Not so much difference," said Winnie, "as you see in me."

"It was to be expected there should be a difference," said Sir Edward. "You were but a girl when you went away. I hope you are going to make a good long stay. You will find us just as quiet as ever, and as humdrum, but very delighted to see you."

To this Winnie made no reply. She neither answered his question, nor gave any response to

his expression of kindness, and the old man sat and looked at her with a deeper wrinkle than ever across his brow.

"She *must* pay me a long visit," said poor Aunt Agatha, "since she has been so long of coming. Now that I have her she shall not go away."

"And Percival?" said Sir Edward. He had cast about in his own mind for the best means of approaching this difficult subject, but had ended by feeling there was nothing for it but plain speaking. And then, though there were reports that they did not "get on," still there was nothing as yet to justify suspicions of a final rupture. "I hope you left him quite well; I hope we are to see him, too."

"He was very well when I left him, thank you," said Winnie, with steady formality; and then the conversation once more came to a dead stop.

Sir Edward was disconcerted. He had come to examine, to reprove, and to exhort, but he was not prepared to be met with this steady front of unconsciousness. He thought the wanderer had most likely come home full of complaints and outcries, and that it might be in his power to set her right. He hemmed and cleared his throat a little, and cast about what he should say, but he

had no better inspiration than to turn to Aunt Agatha and disturb her gentle mind with another topic, and for this moment let the original subject rest.

"Ah—have you heard lately from Earlston?" he said, turning to Miss Seton. "I have just been hearing a report about Francis Ochterlony. I hope it is not true."

"What kind of report?" said Aunt Agatha, breathlessly. A few minutes before she could not have believed that any consideration whatever would have disturbed her from the one subject which was for the moment dearest to her heart—but Sir Edward with his usual felicity had found out another chord which vibrated almost as painfully. Her old delusion recurred to Aunt Agatha with the swiftness of lightning. He might be going to marry, and divert the inheritance from Hugh, and she did her best to persuade her lips to a kind of smile.

"They say he is ill," said Sir Edward; "but of course if *you* have not heard—I thought he did not look like himself when we were there. Very poorly I heard—not anything violent you know, but a sort of breaking up. Perhaps it is not true."

Aunt Agatha's heart had been getting hard usage for some time back. It had jumped to her

mouth, and sunk into depths as deep as heart can sink to, time after time in these eventful days. Now she only felt it contract as it were, as if somebody had seized it violently, and she gave a little cry, for it hurt her.

"Oh, Sir Edward, it cannot be true," she said. "We had a letter from Hugh on Monday, and he does not say a word. It cannot be true."

"Hugh is very young," said Sir Edward, who did not like to be supposed wrong in a point of fact. "A boy with no experience might see a man all but dying, and as long as he did not complain would never know."

"But he looked very well when we were there," said Aunt Agatha, faltering. If she had been alone she would have shed silent tears, and her thoughts would have been both sad and bitter; but this was not a moment to think of her own feelings—nor above all to cry.

Sir Edward shook his head. "I always mistrust those sort of looks for my part," he said. "A big man has always an appearance of strength, and that carries it off."

"Is it Mr. Ochterlony?" said Winnie, interposing for the first time. "What luck Mary has and her boys! And so Hugh will come into the property without any waiting. It may be very

sad of course, Aunt Agatha, but it is great luck for him at his age."

"Oh, Winnie, my dear love!" cried Aunt Agatha, feebly. It was a speech that went to her heart, but she was dumb between the two people who did not care for Francis Ochterlony, and could find nothing to say.

"I hope that is not the way in which any of us look at it," said Sir Edward with gentle severity; and then he added, "I always thought if you had been left a little more to yourselves when we were at Earlston that still you might have made it up."

"Oh no, no!" said Aunt Agatha, "now that we are both old people—and he was always far too sensible. But it was not anything of that sort. Francis Ochterlony and I were—were always dear friends."

"Well, you must let me know next time when Hugh writes," said Sir Edward, "and I hope we shall have better news." When he said this he turned again quite abruptly to Winnie, who had dropped once more into her own thoughts, and expected no new assault.

"Percival is coming to fetch you, I suppose?" he said. "I think I can offer him some good shooting in a month or two. This may overcloud us all a little if—if anything should happen

to Francis Ochterlony. But after what your Aunt Agatha says, I feel disposed to hope the best."

"Yes, I hope so," said Winnie; which was a very unsatisfactory reply.

"Of course you are citizens of the world, and we are very quiet people," said Sir Edward. "I suppose promotion comes slow in these times of peace. I should have thought he was entitled to another step by this time; but we civilians know so little about military affairs."

"I thought everybody knew that steps were bought," said Winnie; and once more the conversation broke off dead.

It was a relief to them all when Mary came into the room, and had to be told about Mr. Ochterlony's supposed illness, and to take a reasonable place between Aunt Agatha's panic-stricken assurance that it was not true, and Sir Edward's calmly indifferent belief that it was. Mary for the first time suggested that a man might be ill, and yet not at the point of death, which was a conclusion to which the others had leapt. And then they all made a little effort at ordinary talk.

"You will have everybody coming to call," said Sir Edward, "now that Winnie is known to have come home; and I daresay Percival will

find Mary's military friends a great resource when he comes. Love-making being over, he will want some substitute——"

"Who are Mary's military friends?" said Winnie, suddenly breaking in.

"Only some people in our old regiment," said Mary. "It is stationed at Carlisle, strangely enough. You know the Askells, I think, and——"

"The Askells!" said Winnie, and her face grew dark. "Are they here, all that wretched set of people?—Mary's friends. Ah, I might have known——"

"My dear love, she is a very silly little woman; but Nelly is delightful, and he is very nice, poor man," cried Aunt Agatha, eager to interfere.

"Yes, poor man, he is very nice," said Winnie, with contempt; "his wife is an idiot, and he doesn't beat her; I am sure I should, if I were he. Who's Nelly? and that horrid Methodist of a woman, and the old maid that reads novels? Why didn't you tell me of them? If I had known, I should never have come here."

"Oh, Winnie, my darling!" cried Aunt Agatha; "but I did mention them; and so did Mary, I feel sure."

"They are Mary's friends," said Winnie, with bitterness, and then she stopped herself abruptly.

The others were like an army of observation round a beleaguered city, which was not guided by the most perfect wisdom, but lost its temper now and then, and made injudicious sallies. Now Winnie shut up her gates, and drew in her garrison once more; and her companions looked at each other doubtfully, seeing a world of sore and wounded feeling, distrust, and resistance, and mystery to which they had no clue. She had gone away a girl, full of youthful bravado, and fearing nothing. She had come back a stranger, with a long history unknown to them, and with no inclination to make it clear. Her aunt and sister were anxious and uneasy, and did not venture on direct assault; but Sir Edward, who was a man of resolution, sat down before the fortress, and was determined to fight it out.

"You should have sent us word you were coming," he said; "and your husband should have been with you, Winnie. It was he who took you away, and he ought to have come back to give an account of his stewardship. I shall tell him so when he comes."

Again Winnie made no answer; her face contracted slightly; but soon settled back again into its blank look of self-concentration, and no response came.

"He has no appointment, I suppose; no adju-

tantship, or anything to keep him from getting away?"

"No," said Winnie.

"Perhaps he has gone to see his mother?" said Sir Edward, brightening up. "She is getting quite an old woman, and longs to see him; and you, my pretty Winnie, too. I suppose you will pay her your long-deferred visit, now you have returned to this country? Percival is there?"

"No—I think not," said Winnie, winding herself up in her shawl, as she had done before.

"Then you have left him at ——, where he is stationed now," said Sir Edward, becoming more and more point-blank in his attack.

"Look here, Sir Edward," said Winnie; "we are citizens of the world, as you say, and we have not lived such a tranquil life as you have. I did not come here to give an account of my husband; he can take care of himself. I came to have a little quiet and rest, and not to be asked questions. If one could be let alone anywhere, it surely should be in one's own home."

"No, indeed," said Sir Edward, who was embarrassed, and yet more arbitrary than ever; "for in your own home people have a right to know all about you. Though I am not exactly a relative, I have known you all your life; I may say I brought you up, like a child of my own; and to

see you come home like this, all alone, without baggage or attendant, as if you had dropped from the skies, and nobody knowing where you come from, or anything about it,—I think, Winnie, my dear, when you consider of it, you will see it is precisely your own friends who ought to know."

Then Aunt Agatha rushed into the *mêlée*, feeling in her own person a little irritated by her old friend's lecture and inquisition.

"Sir Edward is making a mistake, my dear love," she said; "he does not know. Dear Winnie has been telling me everything. It is so nice to know all about her. Those little details that can never go into letters; and when—when Major Percival comes——"

"It is very good of you, Aunt Agatha," said Winnie, with a certain quiet disdain; "but I did not mean to deceive anybody—Major Percival is not coming that I know of. I am old enough to manage for myself: Mary came home from India when she was not quite my age."

"Oh, my dear love, poor Mary was a widow," cried Aunt Agatha; "you must not speak of that."

"Yes, I know Mary has always had the best of it," said Winnie, under her breath; "you never made a set against her as you do against me. If

there is an inquisition at Kirtell, I will go somewhere else. I came to have a little quiet; that is all I want in this world."

It was well for Winnie that she turned away abruptly at that moment, and did not see Sir Edward's look, which he turned first upon Mary and then on Aunt Agatha. She did not see it, and it was well for her. When he went away soon after, Miss Seton went out into the garden with him, in obedience to his signals, and then he unburdened his mind.

"It seems to me that she must have run away from him," said Sir Edward. "It is very well she has come here; but still it is unpleasant, to make the best of it. I am sure he has behaved very badly; but I must say I am a little disappointed in Winnie. I was, as you may remember, at the very first when she made up her mind so soon."

"There is no reason for thinking she has run away," said Aunt Agatha. "Why should she have run away? I hope a lady may come to her aunt and her sister without compromising herself in any way."

Sir Edward shook his head. "A married woman's place is with her husband," he said, sententiously. He was old, and he was more

moral, and perhaps less sentimental, in his remarks than formerly. "And how she is changed! There must have been a great deal of excitement and late hours, and bills and all that sort of thing, before she came to look like that."

"You are very hard upon my poor Winnie," said Aunt Agatha, with a long-restrained sob.

"I am not hard upon her. On the contrary, I would save her if I could," said Sir Edward, solemnly. "My dear Agatha, I am very, very sorry for you. What with poor Francis Ochterlony's illness, and this heavy burden——"

Miss Seton was seized with one of those passions of impatience and indignation to which a man's heavy way of blundering over sore subjects sometimes moves a woman. "It was all Francis Ochterlony's fault," she said, lifting her little tremulous white hands. "It was his fault, and not mine. He might have had some one that could have taken care of him all these years, and he chose his marble images instead —and I will not take the blame; it was no fault of mine. And then my poor darling child——"

But here Miss Seton's strength, being the

strength of excitement solely, gave way, and her voice broke, and she had to take both her hands to dry the fast-coming tears.

"Well, well, well!" said Sir Edward. "Dear me, I never meant to excite you so. What I was saying was with the kindest intention. Let us hope Ochterlony is better, and that all will turn out pleasantly for Winnie. If you find yourself unequal to the emergency, you know—and want a man's assistance——"

"Thank you," said Aunt Agatha, with dignity; "but I do not think so much of a man's assistance as I used to do. Mary is so very sensible, and if one does the very best one can——"

"Oh, of course I am not a person to interfere," said Sir Edward; and he walked away with an air still more dignified than that which Aunt Agatha had put on, but very shaky, poor old gentleman, about his knees, which slightly diminished the effect. As for Aunt Agatha, she turned her back upon him steadily, and walked back to the Cottage with all the stateliness of a woman aggrieved. But nevertheless the pins and needles were in her heart, and her mind was full of anxiety and distress. She had felt very strongly the great mistake made by Francis Ochterlony, and how he had spoiled both their

lives—but that was not to say that she could hear of his illness with philosophy. And then Winnie, who was not ill, but whose reputation and position might be in deadly danger for anything Miss Seton knew. Aunt Agatha knew nothing better to do than to call Mary privately out of the room and pour forth her troubles. It did no good, but it relieved her mind. Why was Sir Edward so suspicious and disagreeable—why had he ceased "to understand people;"—and why was Hugh so young and inexperienced, and incapable of judging whether his uncle was or was not seriously ill;—and why did not "they" write? Aunt Agatha did not know whom she meant by "they," nor why she blamed poor Hugh. But it relieved her mind. And when she had pushed her burden off on to Mary's shoulders, the weight was naturally much lightened on her own.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUGH, however, it is quite true, was very inexperienced. He did not even notice that his uncle was very ill. He sat with him at dinner and saw that he did not eat anything, and yet never saw it; and he went with him sometimes when he tottered about the garden in the morning, and never found out that he tottered; and sat with him at night, and was very kind and attentive, and very fond of his uncle, and never remarked anything the matter with his breathing. He was very young, and he knew no better, and it never seemed to him that short breathing and unequal steps and a small appetite were anything remarkable at Mr. Ochterlony's age. If there had been a lady in the house it might have made a wonderful difference; but to be sure it was Francis Ochterlony's own doing that there was not a lady in the house. And he was not him-

self so shortsighted as Hugh. His own growing weakness was something of which he was perfectly well aware, and he knew, too, how his breath caught of nights, and looking forward into the future saw the shadow drawing nearer his door, and was not afraid of it. Probably the first thought went chill to his heart, the thought that he was mortal like other people, and might have to die. But his life had been such a life as to make him very composed about it, and not disinclined to think that a change might be for the better. He was not very clear about the unseen world—for one thing, he had nobody there in particular belonging to him except the father and mother who were gone ages ago; and it did not seem very important to himself personally whether he was going to a long sleep, or going to another probation, or into pure blessedness, which of all the three was, possibly, the hypothesis which he understood least. Perhaps, on the whole, if he had been to come to an end altogether he would not have much minded; but his state of feeling was, that God certainly knew all about it, and that He would arrange it all right. It was a kind of pagan state of mind; and yet there was in it something of the faith of the little child which was once set up as the highest model of faith by the highest authority.

No doubt Mr. Ochterlony had a great many thoughts on the subject, as he sat buried in the deep chair in his study, and gazed into the little red spark of fire which was lighted for him all that summer through, though the weather was so genial. His were not bright thoughts, but very calm ones; and perhaps his perfect composure about it all was one reason why Hugh took it as a matter of course, and went on quite cheerily and lightly, and never found out there was anything the matter with him until the very last.

It was one morning when Mr. Ochterlony had been later than usual of coming downstairs. When he did make his appearance it was nearly noon, and he was in his dressing-gown, which was an unheard-of thing for him. Instead of going out to the garden, he called Hugh, and asked him to give him his arm while he made a little *tour* of the house. They went from the library to the dining-room, and then upstairs to the great drawing-room where the Venus and the Psyche were. When they had got that length Mr. Ochterlony dropped into a chair, and gasped for breath, and looked round upon his treasures. And then Hugh, who was looking on, began to feel very uneasy and anxious for the first time.

"One can't take them with one," said Mr. Ochterlony, with a sigh and a smile; "and you will not care for them much, Hugh. I don't mean to put any burden upon you: they are worth a good deal of money; but I'd rather you did not sell them, if you could make up your mind to the sacrifice."

"If they were mine I certainly should not sell them," said Hugh; "but as they are yours, uncle, I don't see that it matters what I would do."

Mr. Ochterlony smiled, and looked kindly at him, but he did not give him any direct answer. "If they were yours," he said—"suppose the case—then what would you do with them?"

"I would collect them in a museum somewhere, and call them by your name," said Hugh, on the spur of the moment. "You almost ought to do that yourself, uncle, there are so few people to see them here."

Mr. Ochterlony's languid eyes brightened a little. "They are worth a good deal of money," he said.

"If they were worth a mint of money, I don't see what that matters," said Hugh, with youthful extravagance.

His uncle looked at him again, and once more

the languid eye lighted up, and a tinge of colour came to the grey cheek.

"I think you mean it, Hugh," he said, "and it is pleasant to think you do mean it now, even if—— I have been an economical man, in every way but this, and I think you would not miss it. But I wont put any bondage upon you. By the way, they would belong to the personalty. Perhaps there's a will wanted for that. It was stupid of me not to think of it before. I ought to see about it this very day."

"Uncle," said Hugh, who had been sitting on the arm of a chair looking at him, and seeing, as by a sudden revelation, all the gradual changes which he had not noticed when they began: the shortened breath, the emaciated form, and the deep large circle round the eyes,—"Uncle, will you tell me seriously what you mean when you speak to me like this?"

"On second thoughts, it will be best to do it at once," said Mr. Ochterlony. "Hugh, ring the bell—— What do I speak like this for, my boy? For a very plain reason; because my course is going to end, and yours is only going to begin."

"But, uncle!" cried Hugh.

"Hush—the one ought to be a kind of con-

tinuation of the other," said Mr. Ochterlony, "since you will take up where I leave off; but I hope you will do better than that. If you should feel yourself justified in thinking of the museum afterwards—— But I would not like to leave any burden upon you. John, let some one ride into Dalken directly, and ask Mr. Preston, the attorney, to come to me—or his son will do. I should like to see him to-day—— And stop," said Mr. Ochterlony, reluctantly, "he may fetch the doctor, too."

"Uncle, do you feel ill?" said Hugh. He had come up to his uncle's side, and he had taken fright, and was looking at him wistfully as a woman might have done—for his very inexperience which had prevented him from observing gave him a tender anguish now, and filled him full of awe and compunction, and made him in his wistfulness almost like a woman.

"No," said Mr. Ochterlony, holding out his hand. "Not ill, my boy, only dying—that's all. Nothing to make a fuss about—but sit down and compose yourself, for I have a good deal to say."

"Do you mean it, uncle?" asked Hugh, searching into the grey countenance before him with his suddenly awakened eyes.

Mr. Ochterlony gave a warm grasp to the

young hand which held his closely yet trembling. "Sit down," he said. "I'm glad you are sorry. A few years ago there would have been nobody to mind—except the servants, perhaps. I never took the steps I might have done, you know," he added, with a certain sadness, and yet a sense of humour which was curious to see, "to have an heir of my own—— And speaking of that, you will be sure to remember what I said to you about the Henri Deux. I put it away in the cabinet yonder, the very last day they were here."

Then Mr. Ochterlony talked a great deal, and about many things. About there being no particular occasion for making a will—since Earlston was settled by his father's will upon his own heirs male, or those of his brother—how he had bethought himself all at once, though he did not know exactly how the law stood, that there was some difference between real and personal property, and how, on the whole, perhaps, it was better to send for Preston. "As for the doctor, I daren't take it upon me to die without him, I suppose," Mr. Ochterlony said. He had never been so playful before, as long as Hugh had known him. He had been reserved—a little shy, even with his nephew. Now his own sense of failure seemed to have disappeared. He was

going to make a change, to get rid of all his old disabilities, and incumbrances, and antecedents, and no doubt it would be a change for the better. That was about the substance of Mr. Ochterlony's thoughts.

"But one can't take Psyche, you know," he said. "One must go alone to look into the face of the Immortals. And I don't think your mother, perhaps, would care to have her here—so if you should feel yourself justified in thinking of the museum—— But you will have a great deal to do. In the first place your mother—I doubt if she'll be so happy at the Cottage, now Mrs. Percival has come back. I think you ought to ask her to come here. And I shouldn't wonder if Will gave you some trouble. He's an odd boy. I would not say he had not a sense of honour, but—— And he has a jealous, dissatisfied temper. As for Islay, he's all safe, I suppose. Always be kind to them, Hugh, and give Will his education. I think he has abilities; but don't be too liberal. Don't take them upon your shoulders. You have your own life to think of first of all."

All this Mr. Ochterlony uttered, with many little breaks and pauses, but with very little aid from his companion, who was too much moved to do more than listen. He was not suffering in any

acute way, and yet, somehow, the sense of his approaching end seemed to have loosened his tongue, which had been to some extent bound all his life.

"For you must marry, you know," he said. "I consider *that* a bargain between us. Don't trust to your younger brother, as I did—not but what it was the best thing for you. Some little bright thing like *that*—that was with your mother. You may laugh, but I can remember when Agatha Seton was as pretty a creature——"

"I think she is pretty now," said Hugh, half because he did think so, and half because he was anxious to find something he could say.

Then Mr. Ochterlony brightened up in the strangest pathetic way, laughing a little, with a kind of tender consciousness that he was laughing at himself. He was so nearly separated from himself now that he was tender as if it was the weakness of a dear old familiar friend at which he was laughing. "She *is* very pretty," he said. "I am glad you have the sense to see it,—and good; and she'll go now and make a slave of herself to that girl. I suppose that is my fault, too. But be sure you don't forget about the Henri Deux."

And then all of a sudden, while his nephew was sitting watching him, Mr. Ochterlony fell asleep. When he was sleeping he looked so grey,

and worn, and emaciated, that Hugh's heart smote him. He could not explain to himself why it was that he had never noticed it before; and he was very doubtful and uncertain what he ought to do. If he sent for his mother, which seemed the most natural idea, Mr. Ochterlony might not like it, and he had himself already sent for the doctor. Hugh had the good sense finally to conclude upon doing the one thing that was most difficult—to do nothing. But it was not an enlivening occupation. He went off and got some wraps and cushions, and propped his uncle up in the deep chair he was reclining in, and then he sat down and watched him, feeling a thrill run through him every time there was a little drag in the breathing or change in his patient's face. He might die like that, with the Psyche and the Venus gleaming whitely over him, and nobody by who understood what to do. It was the most serious moment that had ever occurred in Hugh's life; and it seemed to him that days, and not minutes, were passing. When the doctor arrived, it was a very great relief. And then Mr. Ochterlony was taken to bed and made comfortable, as they said; and a consciousness crept through the house, no one could tell how, that the old life and the old times were coming to a conclusion—that sad change and revolution hung

over the house, and that Earlston would soon be no more as it had been.

On the second day Hugh wrote to his mother, but that letter had not been received at the time of Sir Edward's visit. And he made a very faithful devoted nurse, and tended his uncle like a son. Mr. Ochterlony did not die all at once, as probably he had himself expected and intended —he had his spell of illness to go through like other people, and he bore it very cheerfully, as he was not suffering much. He was indeed a great deal more playful and at his ease than either the doctor or the attorney, or Mrs. Gilsland, the housekeeper, thought quite right.

The lawyer did not come until the following day; and then it was young Mr. Preston who came, his father being occupied, and Mr. Ochterlony had a distaste somehow to young Mr. Preston. He was weak, too, and not able to go into details. All that he would say was, that Islay and Wilfrid were to have the same younger brother's portion as their father had, and that everything else was to go to Hugh. He would not suffer himself to be tempted to say anything about the museum, though the suggestion had gone to his heart—and to make a will with so little in it struck the lawyer almost as an injury to himself.

"No legacies?" he said—"excuse me, Mr. Ochterlony—nothing about your beautiful collection? There ought to be some stipulation about that."

"My nephew knows all my wishes," Mr. Ochterlony said, briefly, "and I have no time now for details. Is it ready to be signed? Everything else of which I die possessed to my brother, Hugh Ochterlony's, eldest son. That is what I want. The property is his already, by his grandfather's will. Everything of which I die possessed, to dispose of according as his discretion and circumstances may permit."

"But there are other friends—and servants," pleaded Mr. Preston; "and then your wonderful collection——"

"My nephew knows all my wishes," said Mr. Ochterlony; and his weakness was so great that he sank back on his pillows. He took his own way in this, while poor Hugh hung about the room wistfully looking on. It was to Hugh's great advantage, but he was not thinking of that. He was asking himself *could* he have done anything to stop the malady if he had noticed it in time? And he was thinking how to arrange the Ochterlony Museum. If it could only have been done in his lifetime, so that its founder could see. When the doctor and the attorney were both

gone, Hugh sat down by his uncle's bedside, and, half afraid whether he was doing right, began to talk of it. He was too young and too honest to pretend to disbelieve what Mr. Ochterlony himself and the doctor had assured him of. The room was dimly lighted, the lamp put away on a table in a corner with a shade over it, and the sick room "made comfortable," and everything arranged for the night. And then the two had an hour of very affectionate, confidential, almost tender talk. Mr. Ochterlony was almost excited about the museum. It was not to be bestowed on his college, as Hugh at first thought, but to be established at Dalken, the pretty town of which everybody in the Fells was proud. And then the conversation glided off to more familiar subjects, and the old man who was dying gave a great deal of very sound advice to the young man who was about to begin to live.

"Islay will be all right," said Mr. Ochterlony; "he will have what your father had, and you will always make him at home in Earlston. It is Will I am thinking about. I am not fond of Will. Don't be too generous to him, or he will think it is his right. I know no harm of the boy, but I would not put all my affairs into his hands as I put them into yours."

"It will not be my fault if I don't justify your

confidence, uncle," said Hugh, with something swelling in his throat.

"If I had not known that, I would not have trusted you, Hugh," said Mr. Ochterlony. "Take your mother's advice—always be sure to take your mother's advice. There are some of us that never understand women; but after all it stands to reason that the one-half of mankind should not separate itself from the other. We think we are the wisest; but I am not so sure——"

Mr. Ochterlony stopped short and turned his eyes, which were rather languid, to the distant lamp, the one centre of light in the room. He looked at it for a long time in a dreamy way. "I might have had a woman taking care of me like the rest," he said. "I might have had the feeling that there was somebody in the house; but you see I did not give my mind to it, Hugh. Your father left a widow, and that's natural—I am leaving only a collection. But it's better for you, my boy. If you should ever speak to Agatha Seton about it, you can tell her *that*——"

Then there was a pause, which poor young Hugh, nervous, and excited, and inexperienced, did not know how to break, and Mr. Ochterlony continued to look at the lamp. It was very dim

and shaded, but still a pale ray shone sideways between the curtains upon the old man who lay a-dying, and cast an enlarged shadow of Hugh's head upon the wall. When Mr. Ochterlony turned round a little, his eye caught that, and a tender smile came over his face.

"It looks like your father," he said to Hugh, who was startled, and did not know what he meant. "It is more like him than you are. He was a good fellow at the bottom—fidgety, but a very good fellow—as your mother will tell you. I am glad it is you who are the eldest, and not one of the others. They are fine boys, but I am glad it is you."

"Oh, uncle," said Hugh, with tears in his eyes, "you are awfully good to me. I don't deserve it. Islay is a far better fellow than I am. If you would but get well again, and never mind who was the eldest——"

Mr. Ochterlony smiled and shook his head. "I have lived my day," he said, "and now it is your turn; and I hope you'll make Earlston better than ever it was. Now go to bed, my boy; we've talked long enough. I think if I were quiet I could sleep."

"And you'll call me, uncle, if you want me? I shall be in the dressing-room," said Hugh, whose heart was very full.

"There is no need," said Mr. Ochterlony, smiling again. "But I suppose it pleases you. You'll sleep as sound as a top wherever you are —that's the privilege of your age; but John will be somewhere about, and nothing is going to happen before morning. Good night."

But he called Hugh back before he had reached the door. "You'll be sure to remember about the Henri Deux?" he said, softly. That was all. And the young man went to the dressing-room, and John, who had just stolen in, lay down on a sofa in the shadow, and sleep and quiet took possession of the room. If Mr. Ochterlony slept, or if he still lay looking at the lamp, seeing his life flit past him like a shadow, giving a sigh to what might have been, and thinking with perhaps a little awakening thrill of expectation of what was so soon to be, nobody could tell. He was as silent as if he slept—almost as silent as if he had been dead.

But Aunt Agatha was not asleep. She was in her room all alone, praying for him, stopping by times to think how different it might have been. She might have been with him then, taking care of him, instead of being so far away; and when she thought of that, the tears stood in her eyes. But it was not her fault. She had nothing to upbraid herself with. She was well aware whose

doing it was—poor man, and it was he who was the sufferer now; but she said her prayers for him all the same.

When a few days had passed, the event occurred of which there had never been any doubt. Francis Ochterlony died very peaceably and quietly, leaving not only all of which he died possessed, but his blessing and thanks to the boy who had stood in the place of a son to him. He took no unnecessary time about his dying, and yet he did not do anything hastily to shock people. It was known he was ill, and everybody had the satisfaction of sending to inquire for him, and testifying their respect before he died. Such a thing was indeed seen on one day as seven servants, all men on horseback, sent with messages of inquiry, which was a great gratification to Mrs. Gilsland, and the rest of the servants. "He went off like a lamb at the last," they all said; and though he was not much like a lamb, there might have been employed a less appropriate image. He made a little sketch with his own hands as to how the Museum was to be arranged, and told Hugh what provision to make for the old servants; and gave him a great many advices, such as he never had taken himself; and was so pleasant and cheery about it, that they scarcely knew the

moment when the soft twilight sank into absolute night. He died an old man, full of many an unexpressed philosophy, and yet, somehow, with the sentiment of a young one: like a tree ripe and full of fruit, yet with blossoms still lingering on the topmost branches, as you see on orange-trees—sage and experienced, and yet with something of the virginal and primal state. Perhaps it was not a light price to give for this crowning touch of delicacy and purity—the happiness (so to speak) of his own life and of Aunt Agatha's. And yet the link between the old lovers, thus fancifully revived, was very sweet and real. And they had not been at all unhappy apart, on the whole, either of them. And it is something to preserve this quintessence of maidenhood and primal freshness to the end of a long life, and leave the visionary perfume of it among a community much given to marrying and giving in marriage. It was thus that Francis Ochterlony died.

Earlston, of course, was all shut up immediately, blinds drawn and shutters closed, and what was more unusual, true tears shed, and a true weight, so long as it lasted, upon the hearts of all the people about. The servants, perhaps, were not quite uninfluenced by the thought that all their legacies, &c., were left in

the hands of the new master, who was little more than a boy. And the Cottage, too, was closed, and the inmates went about in a shadowed atmosphere, and were very sorry, and thought a little of Mr. Ochterlony—not all as Aunt Agatha did, who kept her room, and shed many tears; but still he was thought of in the house. It is true that Mary could not help remembering that now her Hugh was no longer a boy, dependent upon anybody's pleasure, but the master of the house of his fathers—the house his own father was born in; and an important personage. She could not help thinking of this, nor, in spite of herself, feeling her heart swell, and asking herself if it was indeed her Hugh who had come to this promotion. And yet she was very sorry for Mr. Ochterlony's death. He had been good to her children, always courteous and deferential to herself; and she was sorry for him as a woman is sorry for a man *who has nobody belonging to him*—sorrier far, in most cases, than the man is for himself. He was dead in his loneliness, and the thought of it brought a quiet moisture to Mary's eyes; but Hugh was living, and it was he who was the master of all; and it was not in human nature that his mother's grief should be bitter or profound.

"Hugh is a lucky boy," said Mrs. Percival;

"I think you are all lucky, Mary, you and your children. To come into Earlston with so little waiting, and have everything left in his own hands."

"I don't think he will be thinking of that," said Mary. "He was fond of his uncle; I am sure he will feel his loss."

"Oh yes, no doubt; I ought not to have said anything so improper," said Winnie, with that restrained smile and uncomfortable inference which comes so naturally to some people. She knew nothing and cared nothing about Francis Ochterlony; and she was impatient of what she called Aunt Agatha's nonsense; and she could not but feel it at once unreasonable and monstrous that anything but the painful state of her own affairs should occupy people in the house she was living in. Yet the fact was that this event had to a certain extent eclipsed Winnie. The anxiety with which everybody looked for a message or letter about Mr. Ochterlony's state blinded them a little to her worn looks and listless wretchedness. They did not neglect her, nor were they indifferent to her; for, indeed, it would be difficult to be indifferent to a figure which held so prominent a place in the foreground of everything; but still when they were in such a state of suspense about what was hap-

pening at Earlston, no doubt Winnie's affairs were to a certain extent overlooked. It is natural for an old man to die: but it is not natural for a young woman—a woman in the bloom and fulness of life—one who has been, and ought still to be, a great beauty—to be driven by her wrongs out of all that makes life endurable. This was how Winnie reasoned; and she was jealous of the attention given to Mr. Ochterlony as he accomplished the natural act of dying. What was that in comparison with the terrible struggles of life?

But naturally it made a great difference when it was all over, and when Hugh, subdued and very serious, but still another man from the Hugh who the other day was but a boy, came to the Cottage "for a little change," and to give his mother all the particulars. He came all tender in his natural grief, with eyes ready to glisten, and a voice that sometimes faltered; but, nevertheless, there was something about him which showed that it was he who was Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston now.

CHAPTER XIV.

THIS was the kind of crisis in the family history at which Uncle Penrose was sure to make his appearance. He was the only man among them, he sometimes said—or, at least, the only man who knew anything about money; and he came into the midst of the Ochterlonys in their mourning, as large and important as he had been when Winnie was married, looking as if he had never taken his left hand out of his pocket all the time. He had not been asked to the funeral, and he marked his consciousness of that fact by making his appearance in buff waistcoats and apparel which altogether displayed light-heartedness if not levity—and which was very wounding to Aunt Agatha's feelings. Time, somehow, did not seem to have touched him. If he was not so offensively and demonstratively a Man, in the sweet-scented feminine

house, as he used to be, it was no reticence of his, but because the boys were men, or nearly so, and the character of the household changed. And Hugh was Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston; which, perhaps, was the fact that made the greatest difference of all.

He came the day after Hugh's return, and in the evening there had been a very affecting scene in the Cottage. In faithful discharge of his promise, Hugh had carried the Henri Deux, carefully packed, as became its value and fragile character, to Aunt Agatha; and she had received it from him with a throbbing heart and many tears. "It was almost the last thing he said to me," Hugh had said. "He put it all aside with his own hand, the day you admired it so much; and he told me over and over again, to be sure not to forget." Aunt Agatha had been sitting with her hands clasped upon the arm of his chair, and her eyes fixed upon him, not to lose a word; but when he said this, she covered her face with those soft old hands, and was silent and did not even weep. It was the truest grief that was in her heart, and yet with that, there was an exquisite pang of delight, such as goes through and through a girl when first she perceives that she is loved, and sees her power! She was as a widow, and yet she was an innocent maiden,

full of experience and inexperience, feeling the heaviness of the evening shadows, and yet still in the age of splendour in the grass and glory in the flower. The sense of that last tenderness went through her with a thrill of joy and grief beyond description. It gave him back to her for ever and ever, but not with that sober appropriation which might have seemed natural to her age. She could no more look them in the face while it was being told, than had he been a living lover and she a girl. It was a supreme conjunction and blending of the two extremes of life, a fusion of youth and of age.

"I never thought he noticed what I said," she answered at last with a soft sob—and uncovered the eyes that were full of tears, and yet dazzled as with a sudden light; and she would let no one touch the precious legacy, but unpacked it herself, shedding tears that were bitter and yet sweet, over its many wrappings. Though he was a man, and vaguely buoyed up, without knowing it, by the strange new sense of his own importance, Hugh could have found it in his heart to shed tears, too, over the precious bits of porcelain, that had now acquired an interest so much more near and touching than anything connected with Henri Deux; and so could his mother. But there were two who looked on

with dry eyes: the one was Winnie, who would have liked to break it all into bits, as she swept past it with her long dress, and could not put up with Aunt Agatha's nonsense; the other was Will, who watched the exhibition curiously with close observation, wondering how it was that people were such fools, and feeling the shadow of his brother weigh upon him with a crushing weight. But these two malcontents were not in sympathy with each other, and never dreamt of making common cause.

And it was when the house was in this condition, that Uncle Penrose arrived. He arrived, as usual, just in time to make a fuss necessary about a late dinner, and to put Peggy out of temper, which was a fact that soon made itself felt through the house; and he began immediately to speak to Hugh about Earlston, and about "your late uncle," without the smallest regard for Aunt Agatha's feelings. "I know there was something between him and Miss Agatha, once," he said, with a kind of smile at her, "but of course that was all over long ago." And this was said when poor Miss Seton, who felt that the bond had never before been so sweet and so close, was seated at the head of her own table, and had to bear it and make no sign.

"Probably there will be a great deal to be done on the estate," Mr. Penrose said; "these studious men always let things go to ruin out of doors; but there's a collection of curiosities or antiquities, or something. If that's good, it will bring in money. When a man is known, such things sell."

"But it is not to be sold," said Hugh quickly. "I have settled all about that."

"Not to be sold?—nonsense!" said Mr. Penrose; "you don't mean to say you are a collector —at your age? No, no, my boy; they're no good to him where he is now; he could not take them into his vault with him. Feelings are all very well, but you can't be allowed to lose a lot of money for a prejudice. What kind of things are they — pictures and that sort? or——"

"I have made all the necessary arrangements," said Hugh with youthful dignity. "I want you to go with me to Dalken, mother, to see some rooms the mayor has offered for them—nice rooms belonging to the Town Hall. They could have 'Ochterlony Museum' put up over the doors, and do better than a separate building, besides saving the expense."

Mr. Penrose gave a long whistle, which under any circumstances would have been very inde-

corous at a lady's table. "So that is how it's to be!" he said; "but we'll talk that over first, with your permission, Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston. You are too young to know what you're doing. I suppose the ladies are at the bottom of it; they never know the value of money. And yet we know what it costs to get it when it is wanted, Miss Agatha," said the insolent man of money, who never would forget that Miss Seton herself had once been in difficulties. She looked at him with a kind of smile, as politeness ordained, but tears of pain stood in Aunt Agatha's eyes. If ever she hated anybody in her gentle life, it was Mr. Penrose; and somehow he made himself hateful in her presence to everybody concerned.

"It costs more to get it than it is ever worth," said Winnie, indignant, and moved for the first time, to make a diversion, and come to Aunt Agatha's aid.

"Ah, I have no doubt you know all about it," said Mr. Penrose, turning his arms upon her. "You should have taken my advice. If you had come to Liverpool, as I wanted you, and married some steady-going fellow with plenty of money, and gone at a more reasonable pace, you would not have changed so much at your age. Look at Mary, how well preserved she is: I don't

know what you can have been doing with yourself to look so changed."

I am sorry you think me a fright," said Winnie, with an angry sparkle in her eye.

" You are not a fright," said Uncle Penrose; " one can see that you've been a very handsome woman, but you are not what you were when I saw you last, Winnie. The fault of your family is that you are extravagant,—I am sure you did not get it from your mother's side;—extravagant of your money and your hospitality, and your looks and everything. I am sure Mary has nothing to spare, and yet I've found people living here for weeks together. *I* can't afford visitors like that—I have my family to consider, and people that have real claims upon me———no more than I could afford to set up a museum. If I had a lot of curiosities thrown on my hands, I should make them into money. It is not everybody that can appreciate pictures, but everybody understands five per cent. And then he might have done something worth while for his brothers: not that I approve of a man impoverishing himself for the sake of his friends, but still two thousand pounds isn't much. And he might have done something for his mother, or looked after Will's education. It's family pride, I suppose; but I'd rather give my mother

a house of her own than set up an Ochterlony Museum. Tastes differ, you know."

"His mother agrees with him entirely in everything he is doing," said Mary, with natural resentment. "I wish all mothers had sons as good as mine."

"Hush," said Hugh, who was crimson with indignation and anger: "I decline to discuss these matters with Uncle Penrose. Because he is your uncle, mother, he shall inquire into the estate as much as he likes; but I am the head of the house, and I am responsible only to God and to those who are dead—and, mother to you," said Hugh, with his eyes glistening and his face glowing.

Uncle Penrose gave another contemptuous prolonged whistle at this speech, but the others looked at the young man with admiration and love; even Winnie, whose heart could still be touched, regarded the young paladin with a kind of tender envy and admiration. She was too young to be his mother, but she did not feel herself young; and her heart yearned to have some one who would stand by her and defend her as such a youth could. A world of softer possibilities than anything she would permit herself to think of now, came into her mind, and she looked at him. If she too had but been the mother of

children like her sister! but it appeared that Mary was to have the best of it, always and in every way.

As for Will, he looked at the eldest son with very different feelings. Hugh was not particularly clever, and his brother had long entertained a certain contempt for him. He thought what *he* would have done had he been the head of the house. He was disposed to sneer, like Mr. Penrose, at the Ochterlony Museum. Was it not a confession of a mean mind, an acknowledgment of weakness, to consent to send away all the lovely things that made Will's vision of Earlston like a vision of heaven? If it had been Will he would not have thought of five per cent., but neither would he have thought of making a collection of them at Dalken, where the country bumpkins might come and stare. He would have kept them all to himself, and they would have made his life beautiful. And he scorned Hugh for dispossessing himself of them, and reducing the Earlston rooms into rooms of ordinary habitation. Had they but been his—had he but been the eldest, the head of the house—then the world and the family and Uncle Penrose would have seen very different things.

But yet Hugh had character enough to stand firm. He made his mother get her bonnet and

go out with him after dinner; and everybody in the house looked after the two as they went away—the mother and her firstborn—he, with his young head towering above her, though Mary was tall, and she putting her arm within his so proudly—not without a tender elation in his new importance, a sense of his superior place and independent rank, which was strangely sweet. Winnie looked after them, envying her sister, and yet with an envy which was not bitter; and Will stood and looked fiercely on this brother who, by no virtue of his own, had been born before him. As for Aunt Agatha, who was fond of them all, she went to her own room to heal her wounds; and Mr. Penrose, who was fond of none of them, went up to the Hall to talk things over with Sir Edward, whom he had once talked over to such purpose. And the only two who could stray down to the soft-flowing Kirtell, and listen to the melody of the woods and waters, and talk in concert of what they had wished and planned, were Mary and Hugh.

"The great thing to be settled is about Will," the head of the house was saying. "You shall see, mother, when he is in the world and knows better, all *that* will blow away. His two thousand pounds is not much, as Uncle Penrose says; but it was all my father had: and when he wants

it, and when Islay wants it, there can always be something added. It is my business to see to that."

"It was all your father had," said Mary, "and all your uncle intended; and I see no reason why you should add to it, Hugh. There will be a little more when I am gone; and in the meantime, if we only knew what Will would like to do——"

"Why, they'll make him a fellow of his college," said Hugh. "He'll go in for all sorts of honours. He's awfully clever, mother; there's no fear of Will. The best thing I can see is to send him to read with somebody—somebody with no end of a reputation, that he would have a sort of an awe for—and then the University. It would be no use doing it if he was just like other people; but there's everything to be made of Will."

"I hope so," said Mary, with a little sigh. And then she added, "So I shall be left quite alone?"

"No; you are coming to Earlston with me," said Hugh; "that is quite understood. There will be a great deal to do; and I don't think things are quite comfortable at the Cottage, with Mrs. Percival here."

"Poor Winnie!" said Mrs. Ochterlony. "I

don't think I ought to leave Aunt Agatha—at least, while she is so much in the dark about my sister. And then you told me you had promised to marry, Hugh?"

"Yes," said the young man; and straightway the colour came to his cheek, and dimples to the corners of his mouth; "but she is too y—— I mean, there is plenty of time to think of that."

"She is too young?" said Mary, startled. "Do I know her, I wonder? I did not imagine you had settled on the person as well as the fact. Well; and then, you know, I should have to come back again. I will come to visit you at Earlston: but I must keep my head-quarters here."

"I don't see why you should have to come back again," said Hugh, somewhat affronted. "Earlston is big enough, and you would be sure to be fond of *her*. No, I don't know that the person is settled upon. Perhaps she wouldn't have me; perhaps—— But, anyhow, you are coming to Earlston, mother dear. And, after a while, we could have some visitors perhaps—your friends: you know I am very fond of your friends, mamma."

"All my friends, Hugh?" said his mother, with a smile.

This was the kind of talk they were having while Mr. Penrose was laying the details of

Hugh's extravagance before Sir Edward, and doing all he could to incite him to a solemn cross-examination of Winnie. Whether she had run away from her husband, or if not exactly that, what were the circumstances under which she had left him; and whether a reconciliation could be brought about;—all this was as interesting to Sir Edward as it was to Uncle Penrose; but what the latter gentleman was particularly anxious about was, what they had done with their money, and if the unlucky couple were very deeply in debt. "I suspect that is at the bottom of it," he said. And they were both concerned about Winnie, in their way—anxious to keep her from being talked about, and to preserve to her a place of repentance. Mrs. Percival, however, was not so simple as to subject herself to this ordeal. When Sir Edward called in an accidental way next morning, and Uncle Penrose drew a solemn chair to her side, Winnie sprang up and went away. She went off, and shut herself up in her own room, and declined to go back, or give any further account of herself. "If they want to drive me away, I will go away," she said to Aunt Agatha, who came up tremulously to her door, and begged her to go downstairs.

"My darling, they can't drive you away; you have come to see me," said Aunt Agatha. "It

would be strange if any one wanted to drive you from my house."

Winnie was excited, and driven out of her usual self-restraint. Perhaps she had began to soften a little. She gave way to momentary tears, and kissed Aunt Agatha, whose heart in a moment forsook all other pre-occupations, and returned for ever and ever to her child.

"Yes, I have come to see *you*," she cried; "and don't let them come and hunt me to death. I have done nothing to them. I have injured nobody; and I will not be put upon my trial for anybody in the wide world."

"My dear love! my poor darling child!" was all that Aunt Agatha said.

And then Winnie dried her eyes. "I may as well say it now," she said. "I will give an account of myself to nobody but you; and if *he* should come after me here——"

"Yes, Winnie darling?" said Aunt Agatha, in great suspense, as Mrs. Percival stopped to take breath.

"Nothing in the world will make me see him—nothing in the world!" cried Winnie. "It is best you should know. It is no good asking me—nothing in the world!"

"Oh, Winnie, my dear child!" cried Aunt Agatha, in anxious remonstrance, but she was

not permitted to say any more. Winnie kissed her again in a peremptory way, and led her to the door, and closed it softly upon her. She had given forth her *ultimatum*, and now it was for her defender to carry on the fight.

But within a few days another crisis arose of a less manageable kind. Uncle Penrose made everybody highly uncomfortable, and left stings in each individual mind, but fortunately business called him back after two days to his natural sphere. And Sir Edward was affronted, and did not return to the charge; and Mrs. Percival, with a natural yearning, had begun to make friends with her nephew, and draw him to her side to support her if need should be. And Mary was preparing to go with her boy after a while to Earlston; and Hugh himself found frequent business at Carlisle, and went and came continually; when it happened one day that her friends came to pay Mrs. Ochterlony a visit, to offer their condolences and congratulations upon Hugh's succession and his uncle's death.

They came into the drawing-room before any one was aware; and Winnie was there, with her shawl round her as usual. All the ladies of the Cottage were there: Aunt Agatha seated within sight of her legacy, the precious Henri Deux,

which was all arranged in a tiny little cupboard, shut in with glass, which Hugh had found for her; and Mary working as usual for her boys. Winnie was the one who never had anything to do; instead of doing anything, poor soul, she wound her arms closer and closer into her shawl. It was not a common visit that was about to be paid. There was Mrs. Kirkman, and Mrs. Askell, and the doctor's sister, and the wife of a new Captain, who had come with them; and they all swept in, and kissed Mary, and took possession of the place. They kissed Mary, and shook hands with Aunt Agatha; and then Mrs. Kirkman stopped short, and looked at Winnie, and made her a most stately curtsey. The others would have done the same, had their courage been as good; but both Mrs. Askell and Miss Sorbette were doubtful how Mary would take it, and compromised, and made some sign of recognition in a distant way. Then they all subsided into chairs, and did their best to talk.

"It is a coincidence that brings us all here together to-day," said Mrs. Kirkman; "I hope it is not too much for you, my dear Mary. How affecting was poor Mr. Ochterlony's death! I hope you have that evidence of his spiritual state which is the only consolation in such a case."

"He was a good man," said Mary; "very

kind, and generous, and just. Hugh, who knew him best, was very fond of him——"

"Ah, fond of him! We are all fond of our friends," said Mrs. Kirkman; "but the only real comfort is to know what was their spiritual state. Do you know I am very anxious about your parish here. If you would but take up the work, it would be a great thing. And I would like to have a talk with Hugh: he is in an important position now; he may influence for good so many people. Dear Miss Seton, I am sure you will help me all you can to lead him in the right way."

"He is such a dear!" said Emma Askell. "He has been to see us four or five times: it was so good of him. *I* didn't know Mr. Ochterlony, Madonna dear; so you need not be vexed if I say right out that I am so glad. Hugh will make a perfect Squire; and he is such a dear. Oh, Miss Seton, I know *you* will agree with me—isn't he a dear?"

"He's a very fine young fellow," said Miss Sorbette. "I remember him when he was only *that* height, so I think I may speak. It seems like yesterday when he was at that queer marriage, you know—such a funny, wistful little soul. I daresay you recollect, Mary, for it was rather hard upon you."

"We all recollect," said Mrs. Kirkman;

"don't speak of it. Thank Heaven, it has done those dear children no harm."

There was something ringing in Mary's ears, but she could not say a word. Her voice seemed to die on her lips, and her heart in her breast. If her boys were to hear, and demand an explanation! Something almost as bad happened. Winnie, who was looking on, whom nobody had spoken to, now took it upon her to interpose.

"What marriage?" she said. "It must have been something of consequence, and I should like to know."

This question fluttered the visitors in the strangest way; none of them looked at Winnie, but they looked at each other, with a sudden movement of skirts and consultation of glances. Mrs. Kirkman put her bonnet-strings straight, slowly, and sighed; and Miss Sorbette bent down her head with great concern, and exclaimed that she had lost the button of her glove; and Emma Askell shrank behind backs, and made a great rustling with her dress. "Oh, it was nothing at all," she said; being by nature the least hard-hearted of the three. That was all the answer they gave to Winnie, who was the woman who had been talked about. And the next moment all three rushed at Mary, and spoke to

her in the same breath, in their agitation; for at least they were agitated by the bold *coup* they had made. It was a stroke which Winnie felt. She turned very red and then very pale, but she did not flinch: she sat there in the foreground, close to them all, till they had said everything they had to say; and held her head high, ready to meet the eye of anybody who dared to look at her. As for the other members of the party, Mary had been driven *hors du combat,* and for the first moment was too much occupied with her own feelings to perceive the insult that had been directed at her sister; and Aunt Agatha was too much amazed to take any part. Thus they sat, the visitors in a rustle of talk and silk and agitation and uneasiness, frightened at the step they had taken, with Winnie immovable and unflinching in the midst of them, until the other ladies of the house recovered their self-possession. Then an unquestionable chill fell upon the party. When such visitors came to Kirtell on ordinary occasions, they were received with pleasant hospitality. It was not a ceremonious call, it was a frank familiar visit, prolonged for an hour or two; and though five o'clock tea had not then been invented, it was extemporized for the occasion, and fruit was gathered, and flowers, and all the pleasant country

details that please visitors from a town. And when it was time to go, everybody knew how many minutes were necessary for the walk to the station, and the Cottage people escorted their visitors, and waved their hands to them as the train started. Such had been the usual routine of a visit to Kirtell. But matters were changed now. After that uneasy rustle and flutter, a silence equally uneasy fell upon the assembly. The new Captain's wife, who had never been there before, could not make it out. Mrs. Percival sat silent, the centre of the group, and nobody addressed a word to her; and Aunt Agatha leaned back in her chair and never opened her lips; and even Mary gave the coldest, briefest answers to the talk which everybody poured upon her at once. It was all quite mysterious and unexplainable to the Captain's wife.

"I am afraid we must not stay," Mrs. Kirkman said at last, who was the superior officer. "I hope we have not been too much for you, my dear Mary. I want so much to have a long talk with you about the parish and the work that is to be done in it. If I could only see you take it up! But I see you are not able for it now."

"I am not the clergyman," said Mary, whose temper was slightly touched. "You know that never was my *rôle*."

"Ah, my dear friend!" said Mrs. Kirkman, and she bent her head forward pathetically to Mrs. Ochterlony's, and shook it in her face, and kissed her, "if one could always feel one's self justified in leaving it in the hands of the clergyman! But you are suffering, and I will say no more to day."

And Miss Sorbette, too, made a pretence of having something very absorbing to say to Mrs. Ochterlony; and the exit of the visitors was made in a kind of scuffle very different from their dignified entrance. They had to walk back to the station in the heat of the afternoon, and to sit there in the dusty waiting-room an hour and a half waiting for the train. Seldom is justice so promptly or poetically executed. And they took to upbraiding each other, as was natural, and Emma Askell cried, and said it was not her fault. And the new Captain's wife asked audibly, if that was the Madonna Mary the gentlemen talked about, and the house that was so pleasant? Perhaps the three ladies in the Cottage did not feel much happier; Aunt Agatha rose up tremblingly when they were gone, and went to Winnie and kissed her. "Oh, what does it all mean?" Miss Seton cried. It was the first time she had seen anyone belonging to her pointed at by the finger of scorn.

"It means that Mary's friends don't approve of me," said Winnie; but her lip quivered as she spoke. She did not care! But yet she was a woman, and she did care, whatever she might say.

And then Mary, too, came and kissed her sister. "My poor Winnie!" she said, tenderly. She could not be her sister's partizan out and out, like Aunt Agatha. Her heart was sore for what she knew, and for what she did not know; but she could not forsake her own flesh and blood. The inquisition of Uncle Penrose and Sir Edward was a very small matter indeed in comparison with this woman's insult, but yet it drew Winnie imperceptibly closer to her only remaining friends.

CHAPTER XV.

IT was not likely that Will, who had speculated so much on the family history, should remain unmoved by all these changes. His intellect was very lively, and well developed, and his conscience was to a great extent dormant. If he had been in the way of seeing, or being tempted into actual vices, no doubt the lad's education would have served him in better stead, and his moral sense would have been awakened. But he had been injured in his finer moral perceptions by a very common and very unsuspected agency. He had been in the way of hearing very small offences indeed made into sins. Aunt Agatha had been almost as hard upon him for forgetting a text as if he had told a lie—and his tutor, the curate, had treated a false quantity, or a failure of memory, as a moral offence. That was in days long past, and it was Wilfrid now who found out

his curate in false quantities, and scorned him accordingly; and who had discovered that Aunt Agatha herself, if she remembered the text, knew very little more about it. This system of making sins out of trifles had passed quite harmlessly over Hugh and Islay; but Wilfrid's was the exceptional mind to which it did serious harm. And the more he discovered that the sins of his childhood were not sins, the more confused did his mind become, and the more dull his conscience, as to those sins of thought and feeling, which were the only ones at present into which he was tempted. What had any one to do with the complexion of his thoughts? If he felt one way or another, what matter was it to any one but himself? Other people might dissemble and take credit for the emotions approved of by public opinion, but he would be true and genuine. And accordingly he did not see why he should pretend to be pleased at Hugh's advancement. He was not pleased. He said to himself that it went against all the rules of natural justice. Hugh was no better than he; on the contrary, he was less clever, less capable of mental exertion, which, so far as Will knew, was the only standard of superiority; and yet he was Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston, with a house and estate, with affairs to manage, and

tenants to influence, and the Psyche and the Venus to do what he liked with: whereas Will was nobody, and was to have two thousand pounds for all his inheritance. He had been talking, too, a great deal to Mr. Penrose, and that had not done him any good; for Uncle Penrose's view was that nothing should stand in the way of acquiring money or other wealth—nothing but the actual law. To do anything dishonest, that could be punished, was of course pure insanity—not to say crime; but to let any sort of false honour, or pride, or delicacy stand between you and the acquisition of money was almost as great insanity, according to his ideas. "Go into business and keep at it, and you may buy him up—him and his beggarly estate"—had been Uncle Penrose's generous suggestion; and it was a good deal in Wilfrid's mind. To be sure it was quite opposed to the intellectual tendency which led him to quite a different class of pursuits. But what was chiefly before him in the meantime was Hugh, preferred to so much distinction, and honour, and glory; and yet if the truth were known, a very stupid sort of fellow in comparison with himself—Will. And it was not only that he was Mr. Ochterlony of Earlston. He was first with everybody. Sir Edward, who took but little notice of Will, actually consulted Hugh, and he

was the first to be thought of in any question that occurred in the Cottage; and, what went deepest of all, Nelly—Nelly Askell whom Will had appropriated, not as his love, for his mind had not as yet opened to that idea, but as his sympathizer-in-chief—the listener to all his complaints and speculations—his audience whom nobody had any right to take from him—Nelly had gone over to his brother's side. And the idea of going into business, even at the cost of abandoning all his favourite studies, and sticking close to it, and buying him up—him and his beggarly estate—was a good deal at this moment in Wilfrid's thoughts. Even the new-comer, Winnie, who might if she pleased have won him to herself, had preferred Hugh. So that he was alone on his side, and everybody was on his brother's —a position which often confuses right and wrong, even to minds least set upon their own will and way.

He was sauntering on Kirtell banks a few days after the visit above recorded, in an unusually uncomfortable state of mind. Mrs. Askell had felt great compunction about her share in that event, and she had sent Nelly, who was known to be a favourite at the Cottage, with a very anxious letter, assuring her dear Madonna that it was not her fault. Mary had not received the letter

with much favour, but she had welcomed Nelly warmly; and Hugh had found means to occupy her attention; and Will, who saw no place for him, had wandered out, slightly sulky, to Kirtell-side. He was free to come and go as he liked. Nobody there had any particular need of him; and a solitary walk is not a particularly enliven-ing performance when one has left an entire household occupied and animated behind. As he wound his way down the bank he saw another passenger on the road before him, who was not of a description of man much known on Kirtell-side. It seemed to Will that he had seen this figure somewhere before. It must be one of the regiment, one of the gentlemen of whom the Cottage was a little jealous, and who were thought to seek occasions of visiting Kirtell often than politeness required. As Will went on, however, he saw that the stranger was somebody whom he had never seen before, and curiosity was a lively faculty in him, and readily awakened. Neither was the unknown indifferent to Will's appearance or approach; on the con-trary, he turned round at the sound of the youth's step and scrutinized him closely, and lingered that he might be overtaken. He was tall, and a handsome man, still young, and with an air which only much traffic with the world

confers. No man could have got that look and aspect who had lived all his life on Kirtell; and even Will, inexperienced as he was, could recognise this. It did not occur to him, quick as his intellect was at putting things together, who it was; but a little expectation awoke in his mind as he quickened his steps to overtake the stranger, who was clearly waiting to be overtaken.

"I beg your pardon," he said, as soon as Wilfrid had come up to him; "are you young Ochterlony? I mean, one of the young Ochterlonys?"

"No," said Will, "and yet yes; I am not young Ochterlony, but I am one of the young Ochterlonys, as you say."

Upon this his new companion gave a keen look at him, as if discerning some meaning under the words.

"I thought so," he said; "and I am Major Percival, whom you may have heard of. It is a queer question, but I suppose there is no doubt that my wife is up there?"

He gave a little jerk with his hand as he spoke in the direction of the Cottage. He was standing on the very same spot where he had seen Winnie coming to him the day they first pledged their troth; and though he was far from being

a good man, he remembered it, having still a certain love for his wife, and the thought gave bitterness to his tone.

"Yes, she is there," said Will.

"Then I will thank you to come back with me," said Percival. "I don't want to go and send in my name, like a stranger. Take me in by the garden, where you enter by the window. I suppose nobody can have any objection to my seeing my wife: your aunt, perhaps, or your mother?"

"Perhaps *she* does not wish to see you," said Will.

The stranger laughed.

"It is a pleasant suggestion," he said; "but at least you cannot object to admit me, and let me try."

Wilfrid might have hesitated if he had been more fully contented with everybody belonging to him; but, to tell the truth, he knew no reason why Winnie's husband should not see her. He had not been sufficiently interested to wish to fathom the secret, and he had accepted, not caring much about it, Aunt Agatha's oft-repeated declaration, that their visitor had arrived so suddenly to give her "a delightful surprise." Wilfrid did not care much about the matter, and he made no inquiries into it. He turned accord-

ingly with the new-comer, not displeased to be the first of the house to make acquaintance with him. Percival had all a man's advantage over his wife in respect to wear and tear. She had lost her youth, her freshness, and all that gave its chief charm to her beauty, but he had lost very little in outward appearance. Poor Winnie's dissipations were the mildest pleasures in comparison with his, and yet he had kept even his youth, while hers was gone for ever. And he had not the air of a bad man—perhaps he was not actually a bad man. He did whatever he liked without acknowledging any particular restraint of duty, or truth, or even honour, except the limited standard of honour current among men of his class—but he had no distinct intention of being wicked; and he was, beyond dispute, a little touched by seeing, as he had just done, the scene of that meeting which had decided Winnie's fate. He went up the bank considerably softened, and disposed to be very kind. It was he who had been in the wrong in their last desperate struggle, and he found it easy to forgive himself; and Aunt Agatha's garden, and the paths, and flower-pots he remembered so well, softened him more and more. If he had gone straight in, and nothing had happened, he would have kissed his wife in the most amiable

way, and forgiven her, and been in perfect amity with everybody—but this was not how it was to be.

Winnie was sitting as usual, unoccupied, indoors. As she was not doing anything her eyes were free to wander further than if they had been more particularly engaged, and at that moment, as it happened, they were turned in the direction of the window from which she had so often watched Sir Edward's light. All at once she started to her feet. It was what she had looked for from the first; what, perhaps, in the stagnation of the household quiet here she had longed for. High among the roses and waving honeysuckles she caught a momentary glimpse of a head which she could have recognised at any distance. At that sight all the excitement of the interrupted struggle rushed back into her heart. A pang of fierce joy, and hatred, and opposition moved her. There he stood who had done her so much wrong; who had trampled on all her feelings and insulted her, and yet pretended to love her, and dared to seek her. Winnie did not say anything to her companions; indeed she was too much engrossed at the moment to remember that she had any companions. She turned and fled without a word, disappearing swiftly, noiselessly, in an instant, as people

have a gift of doing when much excited. She was shut up in her room, with her door locked, before any one knew she had stirred. It is true he was not likely to come upstairs and assail her by force; but she did not think of that. She locked her door and sat down, with her heart beating, and her breath coming quick, expecting, hoping—she would herself have said fearing—an attack.

Winnie thought it was a long time before Aunt Agatha came, softly, tremulously, to her door, but in reality it was but a few minutes. He had come in, and had taken matters with a high hand, and had demanded to see his wife. "He will think it is we who are keeping you away from him. He will not believe you do not want to come," said poor Aunt Agatha, at the door.

"Nothing shall induce me to see him," said Winnie, admitting her. "I told you so: nothing in the world—not if he were to go down on his knees—not if he were——"

"My dear love, I don't think he means to go down on his knees," said Aunt Agatha, anxiously. "He does not think he is in the wrong. Oh, Winnie, my darling!—if it was only for the sake of other people—to keep them from talking, you know——"

"Aunt Agatha, you are mistaken if you think I care," said Winnie. "As for Mary's friends, they are old-fashioned idiots. They think a woman should shut herself up like an Eastern slave when her husband is not there. I have done nothing to be ashamed of. And he—Oh, if you knew how he had insulted me!—Oh, if you only knew! I tell you I will not consent to see him, for nothing in this world."

Winnie was a different woman as she spoke. She was no longer the worn and faded creature she had been. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks glowing. It was a clouded and worn magnificence, but still it was a return to her old splendour.

"Oh, Winnie, my dear love, you are fond of him in spite of all," said Aunt Agatha. "It will all come right, my darling, yet. You are fond of each other in spite of all."

"You don't know what you say," said Winnie, in a blaze of indignation.—"Fond of him!—if you could but know! Tell him to think of how we parted. Tell him I will never more trust myself near him again."

It was with this decision, immovable and often repeated, that Miss Seton at last returned to her undesired guest. But she sent for Mary to come and speak to her before she went into the

drawing-room. Aunt Agatha was full of schemes and anxious desires. She could not make people do what was right, but if she could so plot and manage appearances as that they should seem to do what was right, surely that was better than nothing. She sent for Mrs. Ochterlony into the dining-room, and she began to take out the best silver, and arrange the green finger-glasses, to lose no time.

"What is the use of telling all the world of our domestic troubles?" said Aunt Agatha. "My dear, though Winnie will not see him, would it not be better to keep him to dinner, and show that we are friendly with him all the same? So long as he is with us, nobody is to know that Winnie keeps in her own room. After the way these people behaved to the poor dear child——"

"They were very foolish and ill-bred," said Mary; "but it was because she had herself been foolish, not because she was away from her husband: and I don't like him to be with my boys."

"But for your dear sister's sake! Oh, Mary, my love, for Winnie's sake!" said Aunt Agatha; and Mary yielded, though she saw no benefit in it. It was her part to go back into the drawing-room, and make the best of Winnie's resistance,

and convey the invitation to this unlooked-for guest, while Aunt Agatha looked after the dinner, and impressed upon Peggy that perhaps Major Percival might not be able to stay long; and was it not sad that the very day her husband came to see her, Mrs. Percival should have such a bad headache? "She is lying down, poor dear, in hopes of being able to sit up a little in the evening," said the anxious but innocent deceiver—doubly innocent since she deceived nobody, not even the housemaid, far less Peggy. As for Major Percival, he was angry and excited, as Winnie was, but not to an equal extent. He did not believe in his wife's resistance. He sat down in the familiar room, and expected every moment to see Winnie rush down in her impulsive way, and throw herself into his arms. Their struggles had not terminated in this satisfactory way of late, but still she had gone very far in leaving him, and he had gone far in condescending to come to seek her; and there seemed no reason why the monster quarrel should not end in a monster reconciliation, and all go on as before.

But it was bad policy to leave him with Mary. The old instinctive dislike that had existed between them from the first woke up again unawares. Mrs. Ochterlony could not conceal the fact that

she took no pleasure in his society, and had no faith in him. She stayed in the room because she could not help it, but she did not pretend to be cordial. When he addressed himself to Will, and took the boy into his confidence, and spoke to him as to another man of the world, he could see, and was pleased to see, the contraction in Mary's forehead. In this one point she was afraid of him, or at least he thought so. Winnie stayed upstairs with the door locked, watching to see him go away; and Hugh, to whom Winnie had been perhaps more confidential than to any one else in the house, went out and in, in displeasure ill-concealed, avoiding all intercourse with the stranger. And Mary sat on thorns, bearing him unwilling company, and Nelly watched and marvelled. Poor Aunt Agatha all the time arranged her best silver, and filled the old-fashioned épergne with flowers, thinking she was doing the very best for her child, saving her reputation, and leaving the way open for a reconciliation between her and her husband, and utterly unconscious of any other harm that could befall.

When the dinner-hour arrived, however (which was five o'clock, an hour which Aunt Agatha thought a good medium between the early and the late), Major Percival's brow was very cloudy.

He had waited and listened, and Winnie had not come, and now, when they sat down at table, she was still invisible. "Does not my wife mean to favour us with her company?" he asked, insolently, incredulous after all that she could persevere so long, and expecting to hear that she was only "late as usual;" upon which Aunt Agatha looked at Mary with anxious beseeching eyes.

"My sister is not coming down to-day," said Mary, with hesitation, "at least I believe——"

"Oh, my dear love, you know it is only because she has one of her bad headaches!" Aunt Agatha added, precipitately, with tears of entreaty in her eyes.

Percival looked at them both, and he thought he understood it all. It was Mary who was abetting her sister in her rebellion, encouraging her to defy him. It was she who was resisting Miss Seton's well-meant efforts to bring them together. He saw it all as plain, or thought he saw it, as if he had heard her tactics determined upon. He had let her alone, and restrained his natural impulse to injure the woman he disliked, but now she had set herself in his way, and let her look to it. This dinner, which poor Aunt Agatha had brought about against everybody's will, was as uncomfortable a meal as could be

imagined. She was miserable herself, dreading every moment that he might burst out into a torrent of rage against Winnie before "the servants," or that Winnie's bell would ring violently and she would send a message—so rash and inconsiderate as she was—to know when Major Percival was going away. And nobody did anything to help her out of it. Mary sat at the foot of the table as stately as a queen, showing the guest only such attentions as were absolutely necessary. Hugh, except when he talked to Nelly, who sat beside him, was as disagreeable as a young man who particularly desires to be disagreeable and feels that his wishes have not been consulted, can be. And as for the guest himself, his countenance was black as night. It was a heavy price to pay for the gratification of saying to everybody that Winnie's husband had come to see her, and had spent the day at the Cottage. But then Aunt Agatha had not the remotest idea that beyond the annoyance of the moment it possibly could do any harm.

It was dreadful to leave him with the two boys after dinner, who probably—or at least Hugh—might not be so civil as was to be wished; but still more dreadful it was ten minutes after to hear Hugh's voice with Nelly in the garden. Why had he left his guest?

"He left me," said Hugh. "He went out under the verandah to smoke his cigar. I don't deny I was very glad to get away."

"But I am sure, Hugh, you are very fond of smoking cigars," said Aunt Agatha, in her anxiety and fright.

"Not always," Hugh answered, "nor under all circumstances." And he laughed and coloured a little, and looked at Nelly by his side, who blushed too.

"So there is nobody with him but Will!" said Aunt Agatha with dismay, as she went in to where Mary was sitting; and the news was still more painful to Mary. Will was the only member of the family who was really civil to the stranger, except Aunt Agatha, whose anxiety was plainly written in her countenance. He was sitting now under the verandah which shaded the dining-room windows, quite at the other side of the house, smoking his cigar, and Will sat dutifully and not unwillingly by, listening to his talk. It was a new kind of talk to Will—the talk of a man *blasé*, yet incapable of existing out of the world of which he was sick—a man who did not pretend to be a good man, nor even possessed of principles. Perhaps the parish of Kirtell in general would not have thought it very edifying talk.

"It is he who has come into the property, I suppose," said Percival, pointing lazily with his cigar towards the other end of the garden, where Hugh was visible far off with Nelly. "Get on well with him, eh? I should say not if the question was asked of me?"

"Oh yes, well enough," said Will, in momentary confusion, and with a clouding of his brows. "There is nothing wrong with *him*. It's the system of eldest sons that is wrong. I have nothing to say against Hugh."

"By Jove," said Percival, "the difficulty is to find out which is anybody's eldest son. I never find fault with systems, for my part."

"Oh, about that there can't be any doubt," said Will; "he is six years older than I am. I am only the youngest; though I don't see what it matters to a man, for my part, being born in '32 or '38."

"Sometimes it makes a deal of difference," said Percival; and then he paused: for a man, even when he is pushed on by malice and hate and all uncharitableness, may hesitate before he throws a firebrand into an innocent peaceful house. However, after his pause he resumed, making a new start as it were, and doing it deliberately, "sometimes it may make a difference to a man whether he was born in '37 or '38.

You were born in '38, were you? Ah! I ought to recollect."

"Why ought *you* to recollect?" asked Will, startled by the meaning in his companion's face.

"I was present at a ceremony that took place about then," said Percival; "a curious sort of story. I'll tell it you some time. How is the property left, do you know? Is it to him in particular as being the favourite, and that sort of thing?—or is it simply to the eldest son?"

"Simply to the eldest son," said Will, more and more surprised.

Percival gave such a whistle as Uncle Penrose had given when he heard of the museum, and nodded his head repeatedly. "It would be good fun to turn the tables," he said, as if he were making a remark to himself.

"How could you turn the tables? What do you mean? What do you know about it?" cried Will, who by this time was getting excited. Hugh came within his line of vision now and then, with Nelly—always with Nelly. It was only the younger brother, the inferior member of the household, who was left with the unwelcome guest. If any one could turn the tables! And again he said, almost fiercely, "What do you mean?"

"It is very easy to tell you what I mean; and I wonder what your opinion will be of systems then?" said Percival. "By Jove! it's an odd position, and I don't envy you. You think you're the youngest, and you were born as you say in '38."

"Good heavens! what has that to do with it?" cried Wilfrid. "Of course I was born in '38. Tell me what you mean."

"Well, then, I'll tell you what I mean," said Percival, tossing away the end of his cigar, "and plainly, too. That fellow there, who gives himself such airs, is no more the eldest son than I am. The property belongs to *you*."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.